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**Young people's experiences of 'serious' romantic relationships in late adolescence: 'What is this thing called love?'**

**Simon Peter FORREST BA(Hons), Ma(Ed), PGCE.**

**Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Department of Sociology**

**The Open University**

**January 2008.**

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**AUTHOR NO: W4520596**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis mounts an in-depth exploration of young, white, Scottish people's views and experiences of falling in love with people of the opposite sex in the context of 'serious' romantic relationships formed in their late adolescence. It is located within the sociology of emotion and engages with debates about how emotional experience is shaped and influenced by social interaction, structures, cultural discourses and resources. The principal questions considered are: What array of social-cultural influences are pertinent to understanding these young people's experiences of love and 'serious' relationships? How and in what ways are these influences perceived to be inflecting or constitutive of these young people's experiences? In what ways do these young people's experiences exceed the account made possible through the sociology of emotion and, what possibilities and opportunities are there for elaborating this account?

The study draws principally on data generated through interviews with young people studying for Highers in the sixth year of a secondary school. A grounded approach was used in analysis of these data. Findings include the development of taxonomies of 'serious' relationships which describe their constitutive elements, address the issue of why they are especially pertinent to young people in late adolescence and how this relates to their negotiation of specific social settings, interactions and developmental events. Gender, family and transition emerge as particular salient socio-cultural influences within these young people's accounts of their 'serious' relationships and the nature of each of these is explored in depth.

I argue that the theoretical framework provided by the sociology of emotion has good explicative power in terms of identifying the array of social factors which are likely to be influencing emotional experiences but there is scope both for further research and to employ additional theoretical resources, especially psycho-dynamically inflected thinking, in order to explain emotional experience at the level of individual.

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Thanks are due to my friends and my family who have supported me throughout the time it has taken to complete this work. Theirs has truly been an act of love.

Above all thanks are due to the young people who participated in this study. This work would not have been possible without their contribution. It is my sincere hope that this thesis gives an accurate, honest and sensitive account of their views and experiences of love and relationships.



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## **Introduction: The background to the study and an overview of this thesis**

### **The aim of this thesis**

My aim in this thesis is to give an account of what it means to be young and in love for a particular group of young people at a particular point in their lives. In this case I will focus most closely on the accounts of twenty-five young people all of whom were white and happened to be in love with young people of the opposite sex. These young people were all between 16 and 18 years old, studying for Highers and Advanced Highers<sup>1</sup> and preparing to leave their school in Scotland for university or, in few cases, for training or work. These accounts were gathered through interviews which I conducted with these young people individually and, in a few cases, in small groups. In the two periods I spent in school gathering these data I also had the opportunity to observe some of their relationship practices. As I explored their accounts, reviewed my observational and other fieldnotes, and compared what I had seen in the school to observations that I had made some months earlier with a slightly younger group attending a youth club, it became apparent to what extent these accounts were particular. The accounts of their experiences given by the young people in school seemed to be highly contingent on their particular circumstances. They seemed to reflect a variety of resources made available by their social and cultural context and to represent active attempts to mobilise these to understand and navigate their way through their experiences of what they called ‘serious’<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Higher and Advanced Highers are broadly equivalent to the ‘AS’ and ‘A’ Level qualifications which students generally study for in England and Wales.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Serious’ relationships was the term used by these young people to describe a relationship in which two young people would be ‘interested’ in each other, engage in mutual emotional investment and even perhaps, as a result, fall in love. I give a more detailed analysis of this construct in Chapter Four.

relationships, and falling in love. It was clear that the various ideas and discourses about love and relationships which circulate in the wider culture, and the array of influences which sociological theories of emotion argue help to shape, define, perhaps even create feelings, were being mediated through the locally and temporally specific realities and demands of the particular little cultural world which the sixth year<sup>3</sup> represented. Moreover, this process was dynamic and these young people were making active choices about which resources they drew on and how they interpreted their relationship to their personal circumstances. These observations and thoughts underpin the major theoretical questions which lie at the heart of this thesis; what array of social-cultural influences are pertinent to understanding these young people's experiences of love and 'serious' relationships? How and in what ways are these influences perceived to be inflecting or constitutive of those experiences? In what ways do these young people's experiences exceed the account made possible through the sociology of emotion, and, what possibilities and opportunities does this study suggest might be available for elaborating this account?

In the conclusion of this thesis I argue that this study suggests that while it is meaningful there are indeed limitations to a sociological approach to the study of emotions and make some proposals for further research which would help both to further clarify what these are and to explore ways of addressing them. I suggest that there is a need for more phenomenological studies of people's emotional experiences, more research which seeks to locate and understand individual emotional experience in the context young people's wider biographies and, finally,

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<sup>3</sup> Scottish secondary schooling begins when young people are aged 12 or 13 years old with their entry to the year group known as S1. Compulsory education ends at S4, when they are 16 years old and thereafter they may study for either one or two more years (S5 and S6). Students pursuing one year courses usually study for qualification at Intermediate and Higher level, those studying for two usually study for qualifications at Higher and Advanced Higher levels.



that bringing the sociological account into dialogue with psychodynamically-inflected thinking may be a potentially productive means of understanding the ways that young people negotiate their personal experiences of love through the array of socio-cultural resources which are available to them. This thesis therefore engages with questions first raised 30 years ago by Theodore Kemper (1987; 1981), and which are still not fully resolved, about how it is possible to link macro-social influences in a systematic way with the experience of emotions at the level of the individual and to consider what micro-social factors might be relevant to establishing this linkage and how these might be organised and understood in the context of analysing specific, personal and embodied emotional experiences.

In a much more embryonic form these questions, clarified through my review of the literature, were also the starting place for this study. In Chapter Three: 'Research methods and methodology' I will address specific questions about why it was these young people, in these settings and at this point in their lives that I chose to collect data about, however, by way of introduction it is necessary to set the scene and to address the question of why I chose to write about love and about young people.

### **Background and rationale for this thesis**

For five years prior to beginning to this study I had been involved in the collection of data on sexual behaviour, health and lifestyles from several thousand young people. This was accomplished through the administration of self-completion questionnaires distributed as part of an annual round of evaluation being conducted in the context of a randomised controlled trial of peer-led sex and relationships education (The RIPPLE study) undertaken with 27 secondary schools in central and southern

England, the structure and some of the outcomes of which have been described in detail elsewhere (Stephenson. et al., 2003; 2004; Strange et al., 2001). This survey incorporated questions from a range of sources, principally the National Study of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL) (Wellings et al., 1994) undertaken in the late 1980s and, one of the progenitors of this research, Michael Schofield's (1968) study of young people's sexual attitudes and behaviour undertaken in the late 1960s. Among the cluster of questions relating to the context in which young people had sexual intercourse for the first time they were asked to indicate, via a five-point likert-type scale, to what extent being in love had been a motivational factor.

My eye was often drawn to the responses to this item each time we checked the questionnaires for accuracy and completion after a round of surveying. I wondered what shades of experience were concealed here within the five potential responses available to young people and how they decided which one applied to them. As we repeated the survey each year, some young people's responses to the question changed. I wondered what lay behind this re-evaluation of their experiences. For what reasons did some of them change their responses from indicating that they were in love to indicating that they thought they were in love? Was it possible that a feeling once experienced as love could become, in hindsight, understood as something else, and for what reasons might this change happen? Did these changes reflect a perception that they had been mistaken about their feelings? For those who gave the same response year after year, was their idea and experience of love then the same as it was now? How did what we asked and how we asked it affect these responses? What constructs of love might we be projecting through the question and the questionnaire? How did these constructs relate to the 'truth' about feelings?

Could one ever abstract them from the discursive and other contexts in which they were situated? Was there such a thing as a feeling beyond or behind words and other forms of social construct?

These and other questions were leading me towards ontological and epistemological questions about what emotions might be and how we might seek to conceptualise, understand and investigate them. However, my musing might never have been converted to a more substantive form and been realised in the piece of research which this thesis describes had it not been for the influence of other factors. In 2002 I left the RIPPLE study and took up another job to which I turned out to be singularly unsuited. Within less than a year I had left this job entered a period of reflection on what I was to do next. During this period I came back to the question of what it meant to be young and in love. Deciding that it warranted my time and that I wanted to return to academia, I drew up a proposal for a study which I submitted to the Open University and that resulted in the award of the studentship which has allowed me to undertake this research.

However, my approach to this question was, at first, slightly different. As part of my self-medication I had been writing about myself and, when it came to making an account of my school days, I had dwelt long on my own love life. I recalled how status-enhancing having a girlfriend was and how being close and intimate with someone represented a distraction from the grinding impersonality of school. I remembered the bitter-sweet taste left by the memory of screwing up my courage to ask a girl out, the excited anticipation of furtive fumblings at a party or on a joint trip with the local girls' school and the blissful agony of composing wilfully elliptical



poetry pledging my everlasting devotion to a girl I hardly knew. I remembered all the energy expended and all the energy gained from manufacturing an opportunity to be alone with a girl, soaking up the rawness and potency that it brought to the everyday, turning the park bench or promenade into a set of a film in which I was the star.

What was striking about these reminiscences was the intensity of the feelings that they engendered. As I wrote I felt some of them again, and I felt that young man who had felt those feelings within me more acutely than I had ever before. However, I also recognised that those particular kinds of emotional ‘moments’ had gone. Love was no longer the same, not weaker but different. It was still configured within ideas of who I was, who I wanted to be and what kind of person my circumstances allowed me to be but these ideas of self and my circumstances had changed and so too, it seemed, had the kinds of feelings that I called love. Love still straddled both the everyday and was also somehow situated in opposition to it, but what constituted the everyday had altered (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Illouz, 1999; Weitmann, 1999). I concluded that my experiences of love were highly dependent on context – as a young man this meant being a student in a single-sex school and this seemed to be important especially with regard to the fantasies I held about girls – and love seemed to be working out an identity in relation to my family and members of my peer group. My cultural reference points were poetry and the songs of anxious, disappointed, frequently failing young lovers such as Morrissey and Billy Bragg. These reference points were no longer part of the context in the same way. I was a step-father, I was in a stable relationship and my identity was worked out primarily in relation to these aspects of identity. And so, I came back to the questions of what



is love, and how does experience of it relate to setting, place and time, and the vicissitudes of personal circumstances and context?

Of course this account of the route from my first point of engagement with these questions to the examination to which I submit them should not be taken to suggest that, once I had settled upon them, that my progress to the production of the thesis ran smoothly. Throughout the study and writing up period my ideas have been in development. The processes involved in implementing and then reporting on the research were iterative and I want to emphasise that there is no straightforward course from my research questions through my fieldwork to reaching conclusions whatever the structure of this thesis may imply. The processes were circular, ideas and questions emerged as I went along; as I gathered data I went back to the literature and then once again back to the data. This thesis therefore to a large extent conceals a process that Tom Wengraf, citing Maxwell, describes as, ‘...iterative ... involv[ing], “tacking” back and forth between the different components of the design, assessing the implications of purposes, theory, research questions and data and the validity threats for one another’(Wengraf, 2004: 57). This is, of course, not an attempt to mitigate any shortcomings in my work but to place this thesis in its proper light, as the outcome of a process and an attempt to render it coherent without sacrificing too much of the complexity which lay behind its production.

This then is the background to this thesis and how that background relates to its production. Within this exposition lie the answers to the questions ‘why love?’ and ‘why young people?’ As to the question of my adoption of a qualitative approach to this investigation it is necessary only to add in this context that sociological interests

and investments of this kind carry strong implications about the kinds of data which would be relevant – rich personal accounts from young people of their experiences of love and relationships – and this in turn implies a particular research paradigm. In essence, interest in what has been termed, ‘...moments and meanings in individuals’ lives’, is realised in the adoption of qualitative research methods as the means of inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 5), see also (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Taylor, 2002).

### **The plan and organisation of this thesis**

Not only does this thesis focus on accounts of being young and in love in relation to a specific group of young people, but it is also in itself one potential interpretation of these accounts. Another analyst might have approached these same accounts in a different way and indeed I myself might have written about these young people’s experiences in a number of ways perhaps, for example, testing some other hypotheses or informed by a different array of interests and investments in the subject.

As a consequence, this thesis neither claims completely to exhaust the potential interpretations which might be made of these data nor to test the limits of all the available theory through which it is possible to conceptualise and study emotions as social phenomena. For example, much interesting and potentially relevant conceptual and empirical work on emotion and on love has taken place in psychology, anthropology and cultural studies but I have not located this study within these fields although I do refer to them especially where they address questions and issues which also emerge within sociology. In theoretical and empirical matters I have made

choices. These were not arbitrary or unconsidered, but I hope thoughtful and always based on the principle of addressing the central research questions articulated at the beginning of this thesis while maintaining faithfulness to young people's accounts. I have sought throughout to identify where I made a choice which takes my account in one direction rather another and to be explicit about what informed this decision.

This thesis is therefore structured in the following way. Chapters One and Two entitled 'Sociology and emotion: Towards an explanation for the contingency of emotional experience' and 'Sociology and love', respectively, comprise a critical review of academic literature and provide the theoretical context for the empirical work which follows. In Chapter One I focus primarily on sociological sources but I also refer to theoretical and empirical research activity in areas of psychology, anthropology and other academic disciplines. Drawing such a wide canvas is appropriate given the common paradigmatic concern of these sources with conceptualising emotions and emotional experiences as being subject to at least some degree of social and cultural specificity and contingency. I interrogate this literature guided by concerns to try to identify how that specificity and contingency can be explained, what aspects of the social-cultural milieu are germane to conceptualising and understanding emotions, and how these are organised and mediated at the level of the individual. I also consider the explicative limitations of this broadly socially constructionist approach.

In Chapter Two I deal with sociological research which has focused specifically on love and on young people's experiences of love and relationships. I explore how love has been conceptualised within sociology and draw into this review academic



literature on young people's experiences of love and relationships. I argue that this body of work is a rich source for understanding love as an important and potentially problematic dynamic within relationships and particularly pertinent in terms of understanding the formation and negotiation of gendered identities and power relations in young heterosexual couples.

In Chapter Three, 'Research methods and methodology', I deal with the methods and methodology of the research fieldwork. I begin by drawing on the literature reviewed in Chapter Two to identify what the sociological study of emotions entails and use this to develop a methodological framework within which I situate an account of the procedures and techniques which I used in gathering and analysing data from young people. I describe the data collection in detail including sampling decisions, recruitment methods, the processes involved in undertaking observations and conducting interviews with young people, and the ethical considerations which arose and how I managed and addressed these. I also describe the management and analysis of the data, and explain how these processes inform the structure and presentation of the findings which comprise the chapters which follow. Within this account I explore the issues and problems posed by analysing and interpreting the data which arise through using these methods. In particular, I examine the ontological status of the interview data paying special attention to the relationship between young people's accounts of their 'serious' relationships and emotions and their enactment as lived experiences. I address two specific questions. First, can data generated through interviews be read only as socially constructed texts produced within the interactional context of the interview process or do they tell us something about social reality beyond this encounter, and, in what ways are these data shaped

by the researcher's presence and participants' perceptions of the researcher's interests?

In Chapters Four to Eight I present the findings of the research fieldwork. In Chapters Four and Five I deal principally with the question of what constitutes a 'serious' relationship. In Chapter Four, 'The emergence of 'serious' relationships in late adolescence' I identify why relationships of this kind emerge so prominently in young people's lives in late adolescence. I also describe the processes and practices involved in the formation of these relationships.

In Chapter Five 'Doing 'serious' relationships, falling and being in love', I continue to describe how these young people enact their 'serious' relationships, again focusing on the accounts of the interviewees in the school setting. I begin by looking at their descriptions of how they spent their time together. I then examine in detail some of the practices which these young people regarded as important and meaningful in terms of their emotional experiences of their 'serious' relationships and particularly how they related to their experiences of falling in love. These practices include engagement in intimate disclosure, sexual interaction, especially penetrative sex, and having arguments and making up. I then look at their experiences of falling in love.

Chapters Six, Seven and Eight are given over to analysis of three aspects of social context which emerge from young people's accounts as being particularly influential in their relational practices and contingent emotional experiences. In Chapter Six, 'Doing 'serious' relationships and making gender', I explore how 'serious' relationships are involved in a dynamic process of negotiating and creating gendered

identities. I locate this process within the resources and culture of the peer group. I describe how these processes are linked to young people's understanding of their emotional experiences within 'serious' relationships.

In Chapter Seven, 'Love, relationships and the negotiation of transitions', I turn my attention to the influence of two particular transitions taking place in these young people's lives. First, I examine how the transition to the sixth year contributed to the creation of conditions under which 'serious' relationships emerged as a form of heterosexual coupledness for this group of young people. Second, I explore the influence of young people's imminent transition from school (and home) to higher education and, in a few cases, further training and work. I argue that for all the interviewees this prospect had implications for their views and experiences of 'serious' relationships although these varied according to both their relationship status and experiences and wider circumstances.

In Chapter Eight, 'The influence of 'family' on young people's 'serious' relationships', I explore the influence of the family through three themes. First I consider the regulation of young people's 'serious' relationships by the family and how familial acceptance and reservations about these was understood and responded to by young people. I then focus on the ways in which parental relationships functioned as reference points for young people's conduct and understanding of their own 'serious' relationships. I also examine the role that young people perceived that family crises played in the development of their emotional needs with regard to their 'serious' relationships.



The analytical work and discussion of findings reported in Chapters Four to Eight are framed by the theoretical concerns and interpretative resources offered by a sociological approach to conceptualising and understanding emotions and emotional experiences. They are centred on the proposition that emotions cannot be reified or abstracted from their cultural context and the social practices through which they are expressed. In Chapter Nine, 'Conclusion', I examine some of the limitations of this paradigm and, in the context of summarising the main findings of this study make some proposals for how they it might be addressed through further research.

### **Contribution to knowledge**

This thesis aims to contribute to sociological knowledge in a number of ways. First, it adds to the body of research about young people's experiences of relationships by extending and developing that portion of this research which has focused on experiences of love. It also makes a contribution to the sociology of emotion by developing an argument based on empirical research that although a sociological approach to emotion identifies what factors will be part of the array of socio-cultural influences on emotion, what weight various aspects have, what meanings they acquire and how they are assembled around the experience of the individual are heavily dependent on the local context. The thesis also identifies some of the limitations of a purely sociological account of emotions in terms of accounting for the dynamic relationship between the individual and the socio-cultural resources on which they draw to understand their emotional experiences. It contributes to debates about what additional theoretical perspectives may need to be adopted in order to elaborate the sociological account by proposing further phenomenological research, research which focuses on locating emotional experiences on the context individuals'

biographies and bringing a sociological account into dialogue with psychodynamically inflected theory.



## **Chapter One: Sociology and emotion: Towards an explanation for the contingency of emotional experience**

### **Introduction**

One of the main features of the data generated through my fieldwork was the contingency of young people's accounts of their experiences of their 'serious' relationships and falling in love on the specific realities and demands of their particular little cultural world. These accounts seemed to reflect and represent active attempts on the part of these young people to mobilise a variety resources made available by their social-cultural context both to understand and navigate their way through their experiences. The main purpose of the next two chapters, therefore, is to mount an exploration of the sociological literature around emotion, love and young people's relationships in order to gain some purchase on questions of why and how emotional experiences can seem to be so locally contingent.

This may not, in the context of a sociological approach, seem to be such a radical claim to stake, however, it is important to acknowledge that the idea of love as a contingent construction is in tension with what has been termed 'commonsense naturalism' which represents the basis of everyday assumptions about the nature of emotion (Lutz and White, 1986: 414-416). According to commonsense naturalism emotions are co-terminus with feelings and are in essence universal. What little contingency they have relates only to how they expressed and this is an effect of cultural conventions rather than any difference in the basic substrate of emotional repertoires.

In order to create conceptual space in which to configure emotions in ways that allow for a greater degree of contingency on local social realities I will look primarily to the literature within what has been termed the sub-discipline of sociology of emotion (Barbalet, 2002). This is rich resource because its central thesis is that emotions are crucial to understanding social interaction and cannot themselves be fully understood outside this context (Bendelow and Williams, 1998: xvi). This point is acknowledged by sociologists irrespective of whether they adopt what can be regarded as a stronger or weaker social constructionist position on the extent to which emotions are either products of or shaped by socio-cultural influences. I will also draw on theory and research from other disciplines, particularly areas within psychology and anthropology which share the same broad theoretical orientation.

### **Emotions and culture: The main features of the sociological approach**

It is relevant at this point to elaborate a little further my understanding of the common core propositions within the field of sociology of emotion. This prefatory review bears on the way in which I will organise the material within this chapter and also signals the point towards which I am driving in terms of formulating a theoretical position in relation to the literature. It is important to emphasise that this elaboration is, at this point, necessarily still sketchy and, as I will demonstrate, the details within the central propositions are contested along an axis created by the fundamental differences in views on whether emotions are entirely social constructs or retain some element or elements on the side of the person in the form of biological, psychological or unconscious traits or properties. However, broadly speaking sociological approaches to the study of emotion conceive of them as being inseparable from the social and cultural contexts in which occur. This context is

generally conceived of in terms of an array of elements or dimensions which can be thought of as operating through a super-structural system in which influences at a higher or macro-social level work down through those at lower or micro-social levels. As these influences reach down towards the level of individual experience the introduction of each element or dimension introduces the potential for a greater degree of dependency of emotional experience on the specific settings, structures, and relational contexts in which they occur. This view is summarised neatly by Catherine Lutz and Geoffrey White who describe this conceptualisation in terms of emotions emerging from ‘...The moral fabric of social relations, within insitutionalized activities ... within global ideological structures of the person and gender or within theories used to interpret events such as developmental changes, crisis situations and interpersonal conflict’ (Lutz and White, 1986: 418).

This conceptualisation challenges the idea that emotions are pre-determined properties arising within individuals locating them instead in the socio-cultural milieu. It also opens up the prospect of a reflexive relationship between emotion and culture. In fact, it is also a common assertion across the sociology of emotion that emotions can feedback into this milieu (Bendelow and Williams, 1998; Csordas, 1994; Lyon and Barbelet, 1994). These scholars posit that through emotional experience interpersonal and social relationships, structures, and cultures themselves are (re)produced and are also subject to reconfiguration. This dynamic relationship is central to claims that emotions should be centre-stage in sociology. As Gillian Bendelow and Simon Williams proclaim, ‘emotions provide the ‘missing link’ between ‘personal troubles’ and broader ‘public issues’ of social structure...social structure may profitably be seen as both the medium and outcome of emotionally

embodied practices and the emotionally embodied techniques it recursively organises'(Bendelow and Williams, 1998: xvii).

### **Sociology of emotion and the 'biology versus society' debate**

While the broad terms of this conceptualisation are shared within sociology of emotion, the precise details of how and to what extent emotion is shaped by socio-cultural influences is hotly contested. This has been neatly described as the debate about 'biology versus society' (Galasinski, 2004:3) see also (Bendelow and Williams, 1998: xv-xvi; Stets and Turner, 2006: 1; Turner and Stets, 2005: 4-9; Williams, 2001). What this debate seeks to resolve is the question of whether emotions have some biological basis or whether they are entirely constituted by socialisation, language, and the relational and interactional contexts in which they arise.

Since any investigation of emotion which purports to be sociological has to take a position in relation to this debate it is important to examine it in a little more depth. The first point to note is that this debate it predates the emergence of the sub-discipline of sociology of emotion and also extends beyond its limits. For example, although the extent to which emotions are explicitly placed centre stage in classical sociology is contested, several scholars identify their significance in the works of Comte, Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel (Bendelow and Williams, 1998: xv; Kemper, 1990: 4-5; Shilling, 2002). Moreover, these scholars argue that the progenitor of this debate is evident in the ways that these classical sociologists take up positions on whether emotions are socially cohesive or disruptive, whether they need to be suppressed because they are opposed to and threaten rationality or can be



brought into being through forms of social relations and organisation. The same fundamental question about the relationship between the social and biological is also discernable in debates about emotions within some areas of psychology, anthropology and history (Harré and Parrott, 1996; Harré, 1986; Hollway et al. 2007; Kitayama and Markus, 1994; Lutz, 1982; 1998; Lutz and White, 1986; Oatley and Jenkins, 1996; Rosaldo, 1983; Stearns and Stearns, 1988).

This debate found new force and vigour with emergence of the sociology of emotion. The emergence of this sub-discipline, it has been suggested, is result of multiple influences and it is important to locate the initial scholarly statements and exchanges which mark this sociological moment in the context of the wider social and cultural terrain because this inflects its orientation, influences its points of departure and engagement and also to some extent indicates why and how the ‘biology versus society’ debate emerges in the form that it does (Kemper 1990: 3-4).

One important factor is the emergence of social constructionism as what has been termed a powerful sensibility within the social sciences (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1995; Gergen and Gergen, 2003). Although by no means staking a claim to be a unified field or theory this sensibility is characterised by two features with particular relevance to the sociology of emotion. First, social constructionism adopts a critical stance towards knowledge opposing claims that objective truths about the world are discernable via observation or through science. It maintains instead that knowledge is historically and culturally specific and produced and sustained by social practices and language through which concepts both of what exists and how it may be examined are created. Second, social constructionism destabilises assumptions about

subjectivity and identity. The individual is not perceived to be a repository of identity but a feature of specific historical and cultural contexts. It is the emergence of this sensibility that is sometimes referred to as clearing the way for a challenge to the long-standing tradition in western thought of regarding emotions as situated in opposition to the tenets and sensibilities of science, equating them with irrationality and subjectivism, what Robert Solomon describes as the search for, ‘...The meaning of human existence ... in the calm reflections of rationality’, where the emotions are, ‘...treated as dangerous and disruptive forces, interrupting the clarity of reasoning and leading us astray’, and a focus on mind, culture, reason and the public rather than body, nature, emotion and the private as the proper subjects of study (Solomon, 1983: 9).

Theodore Kemper (1990: 4) also identifies the parts played by feminist thought and activism and the rise of ‘new age’ movements throughout the 1960s and 1970s in the emergence of sociology of emotion. He suggests that feminism’s contribution was to rebut the splitting of reason and nature thereby to legitimise the study of emotions and the social spheres in which they figure so prominently – gender relations, family life and sexuality, for example. Furthermore, through politicising love, feminism identified its role in the maintenance of gender inequalities. Kemper also suggests that ‘new age’ movements of the period ushered into popular culture ideas about self-development, exploration and understanding to which emotions and emotional experience become central.

It is in this context that a series of publications and ensuing debate can be seen as marking the moment at which sociological engagement with emotions is

(re)discovered, that the sub-discipline of sociology of emotion established and the ‘biology versus society’ debate (re)emerges (Hochschild, 1975; 1979; 1983; Hunsaker, 1983; Kemper, 1978; 1981; 1983; Schott, 1979; 1980). I want to conclude this section of the chapter by sketching out the main theoretical positions to which these scholars lay claim. Theodore Kemper argues strongly for the development of a model of emotion which systematically links the dynamics of micro-social interactions in terms of differentials in power and status to particular biologically ‘hard-wired’ emotions in what he terms a ‘sociophysiology’ (Kemper, 1981: 359). Kemper argues that there are a handful of biologically pre-determined primary emotions and that each of these and an array of secondary emotions can be linked to particular aspects and dynamics within social interactions. In contrast, Arlie Hochschild (1975; 1979; 1983), focusing on the management of emotions in accordance with social rules and conventions, argues that it is not a question of simply mapping social relations onto a fixed or given repertoire of emotions or emotional potentialities but seeing social influences as an equal determinant of emotion. Susan Schott (1979; 1980) occupies a third position, although closer to Hochschild, I think, than Kemper. She presents emotions as subject to both socialisation according to cultural norms and only comprehensible in terms of individual ‘actors’ definitions and interpretations which are continually (re)constructed from moment to moment. For Schott emotions are influenced by internal states, social structures and norms, the former lending them their ‘dynamic character’ and the latter providing the framework for action – but neither ascribed a determining role (Schott, 1979: 1323).



## **Locating this thesis within the ‘biology versus society’ debate**

One outcome of this literature review will be to argue that potentially the most fruitful conceptual framework within which to view the data generated in this study is one in which emotion is conceived of as having both biological and social dimensions. In fact, there are grounds for asserting that it is in this direction towards which the centre of gravity within the sociology of emotion is shifting. Whilst the ‘biology versus society’ debate remains vigorous and germane the thrust of some of the most recent theoretical and empirical activity is towards finding ways of navigating around its apparent intractability by working up a conceptualisation of emotion that is situated in the context of a dynamic relationship between biology and culture. From this perspective even what appear to be universal, primary emotions which are innate in human beings can be at least partly altered by culture at the same time as culture itself undergoes processes of (re)construction under the influence of emotions as they contribute to the configuration of social organisations, structures and relations (Bendelow and Williams, 1998: xvii-xvii; Denzin, 2007: 49-61; Harré and Parrott, 1996: 2; Kitayama and Markus, 1994: 2).

In addition, tactically this position seems appropriate because it creates a good deal of space within a sociological account of emotional experience to leave something on the side of person in terms of agency and hence the capacity to negotiate particular, individual routes through the array of socio-cultural influences on emotion.

However, in order to make this particular sociological account function, it needs to do more than simply locate some aspects of dimensions of emotion beyond the socio-cultural. It also needs to define what those aspects are and to mount an argument for how they interact with the array of social and cultural influences. As I demonstrate



some scholars working within the sociology of emotion do indeed clear a space for this dialogue between ‘biology and society’, however, the process of establishing it is at an early stage and, as Norman Denzin (2007: 278-279) has noted, seriously hampered by the lack of phenomenological accounts of emotional experience. I also show that other scholars, working at the interface of sociology with psycho-dynamically oriented approaches to emotion propose that the sociological account, even when it takes forms which are open to this dialogue between society and biology, is still incapable of providing a full account of emotional experience. This is because the sociological account can neither accommodate the complexity of emotional experience nor takes into account the unconscious. I chart some aspects the debate on this issue looking at critiques of the sociological account of emotion in preparation for mounting a discussion of if and how these perspectives might be brought into dialogue in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

### **The organisation of this review and the sources to which it refers**

Given that the primary aim of this chapter is to explore the sociological literature around emotion, love and young people’s relationships in order to gain some purchase on questions of why and how emotional experiences can seem to be so contingent on local social realities, I begin by mapping the range of socio-cultural influences which, it is suggested, shape emotional experience. There is within the literature, as I have noted, a broad consensus on what these are and, without wishing either to down-play the inter-relatedness of these influences or to ignore the way that the ‘biology versus society’ debate cross-cuts them, an essentially taxonomical approach with a focus on what is held in common best serves my subsequent interrogation of the data generated through fieldwork. I then turn my attention to

debates within sociology of emotion and critiques of the sub-discipline which have emerged at its borders with other disciplines. It is here that the ‘biology versus society’ debate becomes particularly germane and my focus falls on how these debates and critiques work at this tension within the sociology of emotion by identifying the potential limitations of a purely social-cultural approach.

Before presenting this review a concluding word is warranted about the sources to which I refer. I focus on academic literature from within sociology and particularly the sociology of emotion. However, I also draw on publications by some anthropologists and psychologists, electing to do so because of their scholarly interest in the socio-cultural dimensions of emotions. In both this and the following chapter, which focuses specifically on the sociology of love, I pay particularly close attention to the work of some scholars (including among others the monographs, papers, edited books and book chapters by James Averill, Gillian Bendelow, June Crawford et al., Rom Harré, Arlie Hochschild, Stevi Jackson and Simon Williams (Averill, 1980a; 1980b; 1985; 1996; Bendelow and Williams, 1998; Crawford et al. 1992; Harré and Parrott, 1996; Harré, 1986; Hochschild, 1975; 1979; 2003; 1998; Jackson, 1993; Williams, 2001). There are two principal reasons for this. First, these scholars have made important contributions to the sub-discipline of the sociology of emotion (as the citation of their work by other scholars demonstrates) and second, their work most effectively illustrates the main dimensions of the debates within the field.

### **Emotions as culturally and historically specific**

As I indicated in my sketch of the basic sociological conceptualisation of the array of socio-cultural influences within which emotion is situated, the ‘top-level’ macro-



social dimension is envisioned as culture. Arguments for the importance of culture as an influence or determinant of emotion rest principally on a widening body of research, mainly comprising cross-cultural studies, which propose that emotions have culturally specific aspects or dimensions and that some emotions may even be specific to some cultures (Averill, 1996; Howell, 1981; Lutz, 1982; 1998; Lutz and White, 1986; Rosaldo, 1983). For example, Catherine Lutz (1982; 1998), Dariusz Galasiński (2004) and Anna Wierbicka (1994; 1999) all claim to identify emotional states for which there are no direct equivalents outside the cultures to which they belong and are critical of research which asserts the universality of emotions, suggesting that it fails to acknowledge cultural differences primarily because of assumptions it makes about the transparency of the medium of language (see also (Russell, 1994)). Catherine Lutz cites, as an example, an emotion called *fago* among the Ifaluk people who inhabit a Micronesian island where she conducted anthropological fieldwork in the late 1970s. Lutz describes *fago* as a complex emotion with no direct equivalent in western societies although it represents something akin to an accretion of compassion, love and sadness. In her words, it relates to, ‘...their sense of the place of suffering in their lives, of the naturalness of the interpersonal kindness in the face of that pain, and of their feeling that maturity consists, above all, in the ability to nurture others’ (Lutz, 1998: 119).

The premise of cultural specificity is also lent weight by research which claims to demonstrate that even where the same or similar emotion exists in different cultures they have a different valency in terms of both their elicitation and the kinds of behavioural response with which they are associated. For example, in his comparative study of the feelings associated with ‘hope’ among North Americans

and South Koreans, James Averill (1996: 30-31) suggests that while North Americans tended to associate hope with the attainment of material goods and formation or maintenance of fulfilling social relationships, South Koreans associated it with the achievement of personal freedom from social obligations and the creation of opportunities for hedonistic pursuits. In terms of cultural differences in the behavioural implications associated with hope, Averill argues that while North Americans tend to say they would give up hoping for something even if they desired it because they believed it should be a result of hard work, South Koreans tended give up hoping for something because attaining their goal involved breaching social standards and norms.

In a similar vein Rom Harré (1996: 10-11) points to what he terms the ‘inversion of a standard of evaluation’ whereby what is regarded as an appropriate emotional expression or behaviour in one culture is regarded as inappropriate in another. Harré also identifies cultural differences in the suppression or encouragement of particular emotions, their existence in weaker and stronger forms, and the existence or absence of equivalent quasi-emotional states. With respect to this last point, he offers by way of illustration the absence in Southern European countries of an equivalent term to describe the state of ‘cosiness’ which is widespread in Northern European countries suggesting that environmental conditions do not give rise to such a state and hence the need for a term to describe it.

The cultural specificity of emotion is closely connected with assertions that emotions are historically specific. In fact it is in this context that one of the implications of the cultural-embeddedness of emotions becomes clearer, namely the linkage between



feelings and emotional repertoires and the possibilities and demands of specific social structures and relationships and especially the ways in which these relate to historically situated configurations of identity and individuality (Stearns and Stearns, 1988: 3-8). One example of how the issue of historical specificity is attended to within sociology of emotion is provided by Tim Newton's (1998) interpretation of Norbert Elias' (2000) research on courtly love in Mediaeval French society and 'Salon Culture' of the eighteenth century and etiquette and manners in early industrial England. Newton deploys Elias's concept of 'figuration' to achieve a critical purchase on these links, focusing on how the complex interweaving of social interdependencies within which individuals exist is reflective of underlying regularities in a particular social context which bind them into particular patterns of conduct and hierarchical relations. For Newton, what Elias's work illustrates is that the socio-economic changes in medieval French society, from relatively parochial fiefdoms to more centralised monarchical governance, led to a move away from one form of unrestrained subjectivity and its associated emotionality towards another which is more concerned with emotional restraint demonstrated through courtesy towards the new monarchical source of power. Similarly, Newton detects in Morgan's (1994) work and, latterly, Hochschild's (1979) and James' (1989) on emotional labour, not only more evidence of these links between macro-socio-economic conditions, social organisation, subjectivity and emotionality, but also a degree of continuity in the direction of these changes. For Newton, what Morgan's work demonstrates is that, as social relations alter, so too does the conception of subjectivity lending weight to a new focus on managing aspects of emotionality in terms of manners and etiquette. The work of Hochschild and Nicky James on the inequitable distribution of emotional labour demonstrates that, as the shift towards

still further individuation gathers new impetus and pace with the change from a largely agrarian society to one based on industrial capitalism, this process of rendering emotions and emotionality in a congruent and supportive relationship to subjectivity and their associated macro-social structures and discourses continues.

### **Emotions, linguistic repertoires, resources and discourse**

The location of emotion within culture and history points towards a third dimension of the socio-cultural context which, it is hypothesised, is deeply influential on emotion, namely the linguistic repertoires, resources and discourse within which emotions are framed and articulated. Rom Harré (1986) has argued that it is the linguistic and discursive resources through which western thought is framed which produce the very concept of emotions as entities. As he puts it:

Psychologists have always had to struggle against a persistent illusion that in such studies as those of the emotions there is something *there*, the emotion, of which the emotion word is a mere representation. This ontological illusion, that there is an abstract and detachable “it” upon which research can be directed, probably lies behind the defectiveness of much emotion research ... There has been a tendency ... to abstract an entity, call it ‘anger’, ‘love’, ‘grief’ or ‘anxiety’ – and to try and study it. But what there is are angry people, upsetting scenes, sentimental episodes, grieving families and funerals, anxious parents pacing at midnight and so on.

(Harré, 1986: 4)

There is broad agreement across the sociology of emotion with this proposition about the importance of taking a critical stance towards assumptions about the transparency of language as a means of understanding emotion. For example, a variety of discursive formulations has also been analysed and its power to produce similar reifying effects identified (Cornelius, 1984: 167-168). James Averill's (1980a) analysis of emotions of passion is a case in point. He identifies phrases such as, 'to be gripped by anger', 'overcome by grief' and 'haunted by remorse' as serving the social function of shifting the origin and hence responsibility for emotions outside the locus of control of the individual (Averill, 1980a: 151).

In fact, some scholars go further in unpacking some of the ways in which this process of reification functions and argue that one outcome of this discursive extrusion of emotions from culture is that it produces the dichotomies which bedevil both everyday conceptualisation of emotion and academic theory. For example, Catherine Lutz (1998: 55-59) and Lila Abu-Loghud (1990: 9-13) develop the concept of a master cultural category of emotion which predominates in western, industrialised societies to elaborate this process.

Lutz and Abu-Loghud's principal assertion is that the concept of emotion is held in tension between two contradictory notions: that of 'thought' (in relation to which it is usually regarded negatively and as subordinate) and that of 'estrangement' (in relation to which it is regarded positively). In terms of the relation to 'thought', Lutz provides some examples of the discursive conceptual pairs which embody this negative comparative contrast listing, for example, how 'emotion is to thought as energy is to information, heart to head...preference to inference, impulse to



intention, vulnerability to control and chaos to order' (Lutz, 1998: 56). However, she goes on to show that this conceptual pairing of thought and emotion can also be construed more positively where emotion is 'knowing something is good to knowing something is true...the natural to the cultural and the expressive to the instrumental or practical' (Lutz, 1998: 57). In terms of its relation to 'estrangement', emotion is identified as a connective force or phenomenon functioning as an antidote to alienation, fear, soullessness, and physical, moral and spiritual isolation or atomisation which is associated with contemporary social life. Characteristic concept pairs pertaining to this relationship include 'community and connection against alienation, relationship against individualism, the subjective against the objective...the authentic against the contrived, commitment and value against nihilism' (Lutz, 1998: 57).

While this relationship of emotion to both thought and estrangement can be seen as inherently contradictory (making emotions potentially and simultaneously positive or negative phenomena) it is, according to Lutz, instrumental in enabling people in western societies to discursively frame their emotions in relation to a variety of social contexts and experiences. She works this argument through in relation to an example which is instructive to describe. In her contribution to Harré and Parrott's 1996 volume on *The Emotions*, Lutz provides a vignette involving a mother betrayed and left by the father of their children. The mother talks about her anger and hatred for her ex-husband who began an affair while she was pregnant and leaves her unemployed and with a family to support. In this account the woman presents her emotions as pathological and potentially injurious to her children: 'So, I think you try hard not to bring it (the feeling) out 'cause you don't want that type of thing at home



with the kids, you know. That's very bad, very unhealthy that's no way to grow up. So I think, maybe I've just learned to control it and time has changed the feeling of hate' (Lutz, 1996: 155). What Lutz's hypothesised cultural categorisation allows is, first, the reification of emotion, making it the property and responsibility of the individual not the relational context or situation in which they find themselves and, second, orientation of engagement with it according to situational needs and circumstances. The betrayed mother can simultaneously be seen to be experiencing her feelings as authentic and justified (good), and dangerous and destructive (bad), and that they can be subordinate to rational control (thinking about how to manage them). As Lutz notes, beyond this close reading of the influence of master cultural categories of emotion on specific social events and interactions we can also see how these cultural categories make available different conceptual and discursive positions in accordance with different social and cultural spheres. To talk about emotion at all is more licit in the domestic or private context than the public, for example. In this context it is also often associated with the broadly positive concept pairs within which emotion is located in opposition to estrangement. In contrast, talk about emotion in other social contexts, such as schools and workplaces, is more frequently approached through the concept pairs associated with contrasting emotion negatively in relation to thought.

What Lutz does so graphically is to illustrate how the ways of talking about emotion available to North American men and women lock into companion discourses about gender, power, control and subjectivity. The ways that North Americans talk about emotions identify women as more emotional than men and therefore position them as subject to the imposition of additional controls to limit the disruptive effects of

emotional irrationality. Although there are paradoxes within these typologies which enable women to find routes of resistance to them and enable them to trade off subordination to emotionally 'masterful' men for authority in the emotional context of domestic and family life, what strikes Lutz so powerfully is the oppressive potency of discourses about emotions when deployed in relation to the construction of gender (Lutz, 1996: 166-167).

This concern with the linguistic construction of emotion and how it interlocks with other social discourses (thereby engaging with the power relations, social structures and roles and positions which these discourses make available) has attracted a great deal of interest. In fact, in some research these two strands can be seen to run together and each is conceptualised as activated through a dynamic relationship with the other; the discursive construction of emotion obtains purchase from other discourses and other discourses in turn gain purchase from the construct of emotion. As Lutz's example demonstrates this is perhaps most evident in research relating to gender and emotion where the power of these intertwined discourses is involved at a profound level in the construction of both masculinity and femininity, and the maintenance of power differentials within heterosexuality (Crawford et al. 1992; Hochschild, 1979; 2003; Langford, 1999; Shields, 2002).

### **Emotions and social interaction: emotions, moral orders, social roles and practices.**

If history, culture and language can be understood as the major macro-social aspects or dimensions of the socio-cultural milieu which bear on emotions then, according to the sociology of emotion, these filter down and are mediated through aspects of the

micro-social environment of human interaction in which emotional experiences are situated and experienced. Dealing with these micro-social aspects of the sociological conceptualisation of emotion is rather more challenging than dealing with those addressed thus far because the idea of socio-cultural influence as a process is much stronger and hence the concepts being put forward require handling simultaneously. For example, thinking about the socially situated and realised context for emotions means working with how they are conceived to intermesh with the positions and positional opportunities made available to individuals within interaction through discourse about emotions and how these interlock with other discourses (such as those about gender and emotion); how they relate to social roles; and, how they are oriented within and contribute to local moral orders. This in turn implies taking into account the functionality and intentionality of emotions and ultimately, because of the emphasis on the dynamic processes and social practices involved in the micro-social context, it is in this arena within which questions about agency which flow from contestation between sociological accounts which adopt stronger and weaker social constructionist perspectives become most keen. This will become more apparent when I come to examine debates within and critiques of the sociology of emotion.

One way of approaching the onerous task of dealing with aspects of the micro-social context which bear on emotion is to exemplify what the concept of socially situated emotion practice means. Arlie Hochschild (1998: 4) offers a very useful vignette in her contribution to Gill Bendelow and Simon Williams' volume of essays on the sociology of emotions where she quotes a woman describing her feelings of disappointment, frustration, nervousness and ultimately elation about her wedding



day. Hochschild directs us to examine the role played in the bride's feeling of her expectations of others in order to understand both how they behaved and why it was (in this case) upsetting for the bride. She also draws our attention to the importance of the bride's own definitions of the emotional event constituted by a wedding and the templates she refers to in identifying and defining what brides are supposed to feel and, finally, how this particular bride orients herself in relation to these emotional possibilities in terms of determining what it is appropriate for her to feel in this situation.

Hochschild emphasises the emotional labour involved in this experience as the bride attempts to resolve the disjunction between her expectations and experiences. This line has been taken by other scholars too, in doing so amplifying Hochschild's point about how emotions become involved in the formation and maintenance of subjectivity. For example, Stephanie Shields (2002) points out that this bringing of emotions into line with situations, situational norms and roles is not just about surface acting – fooling others and responding to social pressures – but is imperative in order to 'stay in character with ourselves'. As she puts it, 'The wrong emotion, or too much or too little, makes us 'out of sync' with ourselves – we engage in emotion work so that we can continue to believe in ourselves' (Shields, 2002: 113).

It is through this process of recognising situations and acknowledging the demands and opportunities that they present both in terms of emotional expectations and obligations that the concept of the relationship between emotion and morality percolates through into the considerations to be taken account of in understanding the constitutive dynamics and influences within the micro-social arena. June Crawford et



al., (1992: 123) propose a twofold link between emotion and morality. First, they point to an expectation that emotions will be expressed appropriately and second, that these expressions will be linked to specific social contexts and interaction. They give examples of smiling as an appropriate expression of happiness and weeping at funerals as a morally appropriate way of linking emotion, expression and context. Although Crawford et al. propose that emotions and morality must be brought into line, Rom Harré (1986) goes further and suggests that emotion is unintelligible without reference to what he terms the local moral order which comprises the 'local systems of rights and obligations, or criteria of value, and so on' (Harré, 1986: 10). He cites some research by Nadja Reissland inspired by the observation that mothers were unable to determine whether quarrelling children were envious or jealous of one another. In contrast, when presented with a hypothetical scene in which three characters might experience either jealousy or envy dependent on their relationships to each other, they consistently discerned that one episode would engender jealousy and the other envy<sup>4</sup>. Reissland's conclusion is not that the emotions are difficult to differentiate but that to do so it is necessary to be able to reference them to a moral context. The problem for the mothers in determining what the children were feeling was that their interaction took place within a laboratory and hence they had no idea what the local moral order within this setting was in relation to disputatious behaviour.

The concept of links between emotion and social roles emerges from these ideas about how emotion is referenced or indexed to specific social situations through

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<sup>4</sup> The participants in Reissland's study were asked to imagine a scene involving three characters: M, N and O. M and N are seated at a café table enjoying each other's company and O observes them. In the first scenario M and N are married and the group, in Harré's words, 'unhesitatingly' identified O's feeling as envy. When, however, M is married to O the participants in the research thought O would be jealous.

occupation and understanding of roles. Emotions are seen both as potential statements about social roles and means of positioning the self and others in social roles. As Gerrod Parrott (2003) shows through an examination of the intentionality of emotions – their property of being about something (anger with; or ashamed of; in love with; or proud of) – they are positional practices per se. From this perspective, emotions are produced by, and are statements about, situational contexts, relations and roles. In the same way that other positions are defined complementarily or reciprocally so too are emotions, as Parrott puts it, ‘Angry people must have a target who is guilty of transgression or blameworthy; the target in turn should feel guilty and ashamed’ (Parrott, 2003: 31).

Approached from this perspective the bride in Hochschild’s account is engaged in a social situation where her emotions both reflect and produce, in a dynamic way, the positions available to her, her friends and family and, moreover, all this activity takes place within the wider social context of normative beliefs and proscriptions about what positions and emotions are appropriate to weddings and their various participants. We should also note that Parrott (2003: 30) goes further in elaborating the positional character and function of emotions identifying a strategic aspect through which the position taken up or assigned (or, for that matter resisted) carries with it moral authority. For example, to position someone as blameworthy because one is angry with them closes off their options in terms of limiting their repertoire of appropriate responses and actions.

Parrott acknowledges the conceptual similarity between these statements about emotions as positions and James Averill’s (1980b) assertion that what gives all the

diverse aspects of emotion meaning and definition is the coherence provided by socially determined rules associated with particular emotional roles. In Averill's view, roles are 'a socially prescribed set of responses to be followed by a person in a given situation' (Averill, 1980b: 308). Emotions represent the temporary enactment of a prescribed set of responses in which a person may be seen as following a set of rules that tell them the appropriate way to appraise a situation, how to behave in response to that appraisal and how to interpret their bodily reactions to that appraisal (Averill, 1984).

These analyses then illustrate all the main constituents of the micro-social sphere according to the sociology of emotion. Emotional experience is dependent on the recognition of what emotions an individual is supposed to feel in the context of a particular social interaction according to their understanding of the roles and positions being occupied by themselves and others within the framework of the local moral order. The negotiation of this micro-social milieu is influenced by aspects of the macro-social context which filter down through it – the cultural and historical 'climate' of emotion and the wider discursive repertoire within which it is configured. When our feelings fail to align with these influences and the demands of the specific social interaction, we enter into emotional labour which entails finding ways of understanding our own and others' feelings and staking positions in relation to each other which enable us to explain this disjunction or dissonance. This might alternatively be expressed as follows: what we feel depends on what kind of social interaction we are engaged in at the time, how the role we are occupying relates to that of others and the roles we would like or expect ourselves and them to occupy, how we think other people like us in the same situation would feel and, if our



feelings fail to align with the situation, how we begin to realign ourselves within it in order to achieve congruence.

### **Going beyond a sociological account: Debates, limitations and possibilities**

The next task is to explore the limitations of this sociological account of emotion. In order to do this I will refer both to points of contention within the sociology of emotion and critiques arising at the borders of the discipline. As I signalled at the start of this chapter, this is the point at which I will re-engage with aspects of the debate over ‘biology versus society’. Again my aim is not to exhaust all the arguments which might be mounted along this axis but to chart some of the main points of contention with a focus on resolving the question of what aspects of emotion exceed this broadly social constructionist account and what other theoretical resources it might be possible to bring into dialogue with in order to accommodate these.

In looking at these debates the main point I aim to illustrate is that there is not so much a disagreement about the importance of socio-cultural context as an influence on emotion but about the degree of emphasis that it should receive. While some theories of emotion arising outside sociology are predicated on different ontological bases, within sociology the debate is fundamentally epistemological. That is, it revolves around how far the social-cultural account can explain emotional experience. It is only where it raises questions about what other theoretical traditions may need to be tapped into in order to make the account more rounded that ontological friction arises. Hence I would argue that the ‘biology versus society’



debate within sociology perhaps might be better reframed and rephrased as a debate about ‘how much biology versus how much society’.

The debate is very (perhaps most) evident in the collision between the views of those sociologists who argue for the existence of a biological substrate to emotions which is subject to socio-cultural influence, and those who argue that such a claim, while it may be ontologically true, is beyond proof. For example, both Michael Hammond (1999; 2003; 2006) and Jonathan Turner (2000; 2002) take the view that emotions are innate to human beings. They argue for the existence of a limited palette of emotions which cluster around desires for attachment but which also bridle against the potential constraints on individuality which may be imposed by the formation of interpersonal ties. This tension, they argue, becomes central to understanding human social and cultural evolution. The capacity to manage it allowed human beings to thrive in loose-knit social networks and relaxed hierarchies which their early environmental conditions demanded. Although the tension does not disappear, through processes of evolutionary selection the emotional characteristics which allow close but not constraining social bonds become predominant. This tendency allowed complex social structures and relations to arise and human society and culture to develop. Hence, for Turner and Hammond emotions are not an outcome of culture and society but their progenitors.

While not rejecting the possibility of some biological basis to emotion, others argue that it is not possible to make this assertion with confidence and also therefore take issue with the relationship between biological and social aspects of emotions as proposed on the basis of this assumption (Armon-Jones, 1986; Lutz, 1998; Lutz and

White, 1986). For example, these scholars argue emotion is evidently inseparable from culture, from attitudes which derive from and attach to specific social-cultural settings and contexts, and from the functions it fulfils in those contexts. To extrapolate a specific biological model on this basis is impossible given this 'cultural noise'. In addition, they also take issue with attempts on the part of some theorists to argue that neurological research involving mammalian species other than humans proves that whatever the biological aspects of emotion might be, they can be reconfigured by social interaction. They argue that this is to ignore the cognitive aspects of emotional experience such as beliefs and judgements which pertain in humans and which there is little evidence of in other mammals (Armon-Jones, 1986: 38; Brody, 1999: 108).

This debate about 'how much society' is also entered into by Margaret Lyon (1994; 1998). Focusing on emotion research emanating from anthropology, Lyon (1998: 43) argues that the epistemological traditions in the discipline place too much emphasis on the ways that aspects of individual experience and subjectivity are shaped by culture. Although she accepts that culture is an important determinant of emotion, she points out that, by reducing both the subject and emotions to cultural constructs, anthropologists may avoid accusations of psychobiological thinking but run the risk of seeking the construction of the one in the other and thus 'chasing one's tail' Lyon suggests that this reductionism is largely a result of the anthropological conception of culture as primarily constituted and transmitted through symbols. Within this conceptualisation, emotion becomes, 'the product of cultural construction through an individual's socialization and his or her continuing experience in a particular socio-cultural context' and the primary mode of access to its examination becomes through

language (Lyon. 1998: 40). For Lyon, it is the relatively unproblematic way that this relationship between self and society has been construed that limits the capacity of cultural constructionist approaches to account for emotion. Lyon suggests that cultural construction within anthropology embodies the dichotomisations and tensions between individual and society described by Lutz and White (1996) and cannot resolve where emotions reside. As a consequence Lyon suggests that if emotion has been seen as, 'part of an inner, and by implication, psychological life, which is both produced by culture and subject to cultural influence' then it is treated as if it is primarily psychodynamic (Lyon. 1998: 42). If it is treated as part of the realm of symbolic forms then it is seen as being primarily related to the construction of meaning and order. In either case it is construed as primarily ideational. One strategy detected by Lyon for dealing with this dichotomisation has been for anthropologists to talk about emotions as both a cultural creation and inside the psyche of the individual. The disciplinary focus on studying emotions through its major symbolic forms – language and its role in socialisation and ritual, for example – also tend to play a role in marginalising its embodied dimensions. The point Lyon is making about how she calls the 'guts' of emotions can be accommodated in anthropological accounts can be held to apply equally to accounts which originate from within sociology (Lyon, 1998: 45).

While some scholars, particularly those who take a strong social constructionist view, such as Catherine Lutz (1996) and James Averill (1980), seem content to clear a space through which the body might enter socio-cultural accounts of emotion but make no claims for how it might contribute to that account, others, adopting a weaker social constructionist position, argue for its centrality (Armon-Jones, 1986;



Bendelow and Williams, 1998; Burkitt, 1999; Prendergast and Forrest, 1998). For example, Ian Burkitt (1999) frames his critical appraisal of the limits of discourse to generate emotion in relation to its failure to take into account the embodied aspect of emotion. While he accepts the importance of linguistic resources, repertoires and discourse in influencing emotion, he rejects any claim which attaches special importance to them. Burkitt suggests that these resources are much more fluid than a rigid interpretation of their power suggests. He notes, for example, that emotion words are more or less neutral signifiers until they are attached to a speech context involving a specific configuration of social relations and bodily interactions or displays. He cites by way of illustration an exclamation such as, 'He is dead!' noting that this statement might register shock, grief, relief or indifference unless the micro-social context, the tone of voice and posture of the speaking body in which it is made are known (Burkitt, 1999: 113). He also argues that emotions are communicative and therefore generated in interaction, including their expression and somatisation. However, the somatic is not static. He argues that an historical approach enables us to chart the changing fashions in emotional repertoire leading us to see that, 'as forms of expression within social practices changed in terms of what was permissible and what was taboo, so the experience of certain actions and bodily functions or behaviours changed; they were experienced in different terms emotionally, associated with different feelings and thoughts' (Burkitt, 1999: 122).

For Burkitt the acquisition of bodily techniques is central to understanding emotions. He observes that children have to acquire the appropriate bodily techniques which form the dispositions for performing or suppressing emotions according to the demands of specific social situations. He links the body to power relations by



suggesting that people must take on the task of bodily self-regulation in order to maintain the acceptability of their emotions and resist attempts to label them as deviant or ill. The impositions can even become engrained in or scored onto the body – so that it shows the rigours of the social context and its place within them through its posture, gait, gestures and vocalisations.

To some extent the debates about corporeal aspects of emotion and how the visceral aspects of feelings might be accommodated within the socio-cultural account reflect wider debates about how the body is theorised within the discipline of sociology as a whole. As Tim Newton (2003: 34) has noted, the task of getting beyond ‘the great divide’ between the biological and social sciences and developing a full sociological account of corporeality has been identified by several sociologists but it has proved difficult to achieve. Newton notes that, as with Bendelow and Williams (1998) working within sociology of emotion, other sociologists have also argued for the ‘social salience of the extra-discursive body, and how any account of the social world remains seriously deficient if it ignores that human beings have biological bodies, and that our bodies are centrally implicated in human communication, development, maturation and reproduction’ (Newton, 2003: 35). However, Newton suggests that attempts to generate an integrated account of the body within sociology are only just underway.

Focusing particularly on some research work which explores the links between society, emotion and ill-health, Newton argues that attempts to forge links between social influences, emotion and the body are undermined by potentially partial interpretations of the biological literature and a rather unquestioning stance towards

the positivist paradigms embedded in medical and other life sciences. Resonant with the comments of Claire Armon-Jones (1986: 38) he also draws attention to the limitations of extrapolating evidence of dynamic relationship between corporeality and socio-cultural factors from the findings and results of experimentation involving non-human animals. He concludes that the body eludes simplistic sociological interrogation and that there are as yet no satisfactory means of 'knowing it' or linking social stimuli directly to specific physiological outcomes. The problem is compounded by the assertion that 'the body and the social' are inextricable interwoven which populates the field with even more complexities so that no singular relationships can be assumed or established. This indeed seems to be situation within sociology of emotion where statements such as those made by Rom Harré and Gerrod Parrott (1996) seem to concede the complexity of issues but do not unravel them.

Emotions are at once bodily responses and expressions of judgements, at once somatic and cognitive. They seem to have deep evolutionary roots, yet they are, among human phenomena, notably culturally variable in many of their aspects. Even the somatic part is complex. There are emotion displays and there are, in some cultures, emotion feelings, and neither is immune from cultural influence.

(Harré and Parrott, 1996: 2-3)

Finally, I want to turn to one of the most contentious areas of debate about the limitations of the social-cultural account of emotion which arises from critiques lodged by scholars operating from perspectives informed by psychodynamic theory

(Chodorow, 1998; 1999; Craib, 1995; 1997). My intention here is not to pursue exhaustively all the points of contention with the sociological conceptualisation of emotion raised by these scholars but to identify their main character and trajectory. For example, Nancy Chodorow and Ian Craib both agree that the sociological approach contributes to the understanding of emotion and emotional experience but argue that it is unable to give a full account. They share a view about what it lacks; a capacity to reflect the subtleties and intensity of individual emotional experiences, and the variations between the experiences of different individuals.

They suggest that the socio-cultural view provides a useful and important account of the macro-social milieu in which emotional experience takes place but fails to reflect the nuances of individual experience. As Chodorow puts it, ‘even emotion words and emotional concepts have individual resonance and personal meaning. Anger, shame, hope, fear, envy, love and hate may be invoked in particular ways in different cultures and in reaction to culturally typical experiences, but these emotions are also evoked differently by different members of the culture and differently for the same member in different internal and external contexts’ (Chodorow, 1999: 165). And, expressing a remarkably similar view but developing a particular point about the complexity of individuals’ feelings, Ian Craib (1998) notes the socio-cultural account cannot account for feelings which,

Might be in contradiction to, or expressed fully or partially through our cognition to different degrees at different times, we can think of all sorts of situations with which most people must be familiar: experiencing feelings we cannot express to our satisfaction; having



feelings that we can express but that others find difficult to understand; and, most important perhaps, the regular experiencing of contradictions between our thoughts and our feelings.

(Craib, 1998: 110)

For both Chodorow and Craib this weakness stems from a tendency to project such a weak sense of the subject within the socio-cultural perspective. Their proposition is twofold. First, that the account requires both a stronger idea of the subject and second that emotion is more a complex subjective experience than can be accounted for by assigning to the subject purely conscious, cognitive attributes. They argue that psychodynamic theory, and particularly a theory of the unconscious which draws on object-relations, provides this account.

They elicit a similar range of arguments to support this assertion, although Chodorow and Craib cast a critical eye over different sources, anthropological and sociological, respectively. They both suggest that even where advocates of the socio-cultural approach propose that their accounts are comprehensive, they contain within them paradoxes which seem to demonstrate their limitations. For example, writing about Michelle Rosaldo's (1983) anthropologically rooted studies of emotion, Chodorow notes that Rosaldo acknowledges individuality and the apparent irreducibility of the subject to social constructs at the same time as asserting that individuality and meaning are ultimately derived from cultural symbols and public cultural discourse.

In addition, like Margaret Lyon (1998), and Ian Burkitt (1999), Chodorow and Craib are critical of the emphasis placed on cognition and discourse within cultural and



sociological accounts of emotion noting that purely conscious processes are cited as means by which repertoires of emotional expression, deportment and ultimately experience are acquired and that reflection is the only means by which individuals can come to understand their experiences. For them this simply will not suffice to account for either the intensity or the conflictual nature of emotional experience.

Although both critiques are powerfully expressed, Ian Craib's is notable for the very strong reaction it elicited from sociologists working on emotion in the United Kingdom. In an exchange of papers he very publicly and directly criticised research by Jean Duncombe and Denis Marsden (1996), and Gillian Bendelow and Simon Williams (1996). . In his contribution to this debate Craib (1995; 1997) takes issue with what he regards as the 'over social' approach to emotions embodied in constructionism. He characterises sociological social constructionism as anti-humanistic, reductionist and overly-cognitive. Craib claims that it mistakes the role of language in the construction of meanings for construction of the objects which are being talked about and therefore conceals as much as it exposes by mistaking, 'the social scaffolding of real emotions for emotional life itself' (Craib, 1995: 145). For Craib social construction also denies any scope for some aspects of emotions to lie outside the social and linguistic realm. For him, cultural, social and relational forces mediate experience and expression but do not give rise to it. He cites as examples the contradictory nature of emotions which orient around axes such as intimacy and separation, helplessness and destructive rage, and love and hatred. While Craib accepts that what people do with these tensions is oriented in relation to the social and relational regulations and scripts on which the sociological approach focuses he also proposes that a purely social constructionist approach is unable to account for

the levels of complexity of emotions within relationships. These, he argues, often involve hidden levels of mutuality and reciprocity in emotional expression which incorporates psychodynamic activity. For Craib this means that emotions are more than the sum of the conscious constructions which each of participants bring to a social interaction. Craib also asserts that social constructionism risks reflecting stereotypes in the study of the emotions. Referring specifically to the work of Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden (1995) he opines that they seem to be mistaking dominant ideologies about emotions (that women are more overtly emotional and emotionally expressive than men) for the complex realities of lived experiences.

The responses of Williams and Bendelow (1996) and Duncombe and Marsden (1996) to these points share a rejection of reductionism by emphasising that they do not eradicate the subject and with it propose that emotion is entirely a socio-cultural construct. Williams and Bendelow point to references to a biological base or substrate of emotion to be found in both Hochschild's and Elias's work (Elias, 2000; Hochschild, 1979). Duncombe and Marsden note that individuals undertake emotion work in relation to social norms, ideologies and stereotypes in a space which is, '...somewhere *between* the wider social and the individual psychotherapeutic or biological levels of explanation'(Duncombe and Marsden, 1996: 156).

A number of things are striking about this exchange. First, that there is broad agreement on many points. All these scholars see social-cultural influences as important and there is no substantive disagreement on what the major order factors are – culture, language and the dynamics of micro-social interaction – the issue is one of degree of influence and what, if any, aspect of emotional experience is left on

the side of the person and what form this takes. However, even here there does seem to be some potential for dialogue, perhaps particularly with Chodorow's view. For example where Duncombe and Marsden write about emotional experience taking place between the social and subject, Chodorow writes about the equality of subjective and socio-cultural influences.

Personal psychodynamic meanings are constitutive of meaning in general as much as are culture, language, or discourse and...personal meaning created by the power of feelings is central to human life...I argue against the view that subjectivity is shaped, determined or constituted by language and culture or that feelings, identities and selves are culturally constituted. Subjectivity is *equally* shaped and constituted from inner life and the inner world is not a direct reflection or a result of that which is given or exterior.

(Chodorow, 1999:5) (my emphasis).

Overall, then the main points of debate can be summarised as follows. There is agreement that socio-cultural factors influence emotional experience but disagreement on the extent to which this is the case and whether a socio-cultural account of emotion is sufficient to explain emotions. There are powerful arguments for shifting the perceived centre of gravity within sociology of emotion towards an account in which the influence of the socio-cultural is understood to be mediated by an embodied subject with a strong sense of agency which incorporates the unconscious. It is only by doing so, it is maintained, that the complexities of individual emotional experience and differences within and between the emotional experiences of individuals can be fully explained.



## Summary and conclusions

The main purpose of this chapter was to begin an exploration of the sociological literature around emotion in order to gain some purchase on questions of why and how the young people's accounts of falling in love generated in this study seem to be so contingent on their specific local circumstances. To this end I have mapped the theory and research within and around the sub-discipline of sociology of emotion. I have argued that there is substantive agreement within this field both in terms of what array of socio-cultural factors influence emotion and their organisation and relationship. What debate there is focuses on what has been termed 'biology versus society'; although I have also argued that this might be better termed as a debate about 'how much biology and how much society' since close examination of even what are purportedly the strongest social constructionist accounts still admit the possibility of some interplay between socio-cultural and biological factors.

I have also examined some of the potential limitations of the sociological conceptualisation of emotion. I have identified that here too there is agreement both that emotion is subject to socio-cultural influence and on the principal dimensions through which that influence is exercised. However, the account is perceived to have serious limitations. Although the sociology of emotion makes strong arguments for the necessity of accommodating the corporeality of emotion it has been suggested that there are significant difficulties with theorising the body which have not been sufficiently taken into account thus far. In the main these difficulties relate to finding ways of generating accounts of the relationship between biological and social influences which reflect the complexity of both dimensions as well as the



complexities of their relationship. In addition, the socio-cultural approach has been heavily criticised for a tendency to admit only a weak conceptualisation of subjectivity and assign a low level of agency to the individual. It has been argued that the socio-cultural approach overstates the influence of both discourse and culture. In particular, this account has not sufficiently reflected or accommodated psychodynamic thinking and theory which not only provides for an enlarged concept of the subject but also offers a means to account for the complexity of feelings, especially the variation in emotional experience within and between individuals.

I will turn to the questions of whether these limitations are evident in relation to this empirical study and whether there are possibilities and opportunities for bringing these accounts into dialogue in relation to some of the data generated in this study in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

## **Chapter Two: Sociology and love**

### **Introduction**

My aim in this chapter is to explore the sociological literature on love. My approach to this exploration is oriented towards returning to the questions I raised in the previous chapter about understanding the apparent contingency of young people's accounts of their experiences of their 'serious' relationships and falling in love on the locally and temporally specific realities and demands of their particular little cultural world. To that end I begin by reviewing the sociological literature on love and, in the second part of the chapter, use this as a context for focusing on that literature which analyses young people's experiences of relationships, love and romance.

As a whole, this chapter is broadly situated within the conceptualisation of emotion which I mapped out in Chapter One which implies that the experience of love, like other emotions, is dependent on and shaped by culture, and is historically specific; is influenced by linguistic repertoires and discourse and locks into companion social discourses; and that this array of influences is mediated through the micro-social realm comprising relationships and interactional practices. It is important to emphasise that although sociological research on love broadly fits within this conceptualisation, it is not for the most part concerned to the same degree with debates about the ontology of love. As Stevi Jackson (1993) has noted, 'Most analyses of love...do not attempt a definition of the object of enquiry...Social theorists have generally...concentrated...on institutionalised expressions of love (Jackson, 1993: 206–207). As she suggests, sociological interest has focused around an exploration and explication of links between love and social structure,

organisation, representations of and conventions about intimacy and romance, the forms that personal relationships take and the practices which they comprise. In short, it is love's social significance which has been the primary concern of sociologists. In this respect, the sociological study of love is as much, if not more, about the social structures that contain and support it and which it in turn informs and reproduces, than it is about any attempt to define the emotion.

In addition, it is important to note that much of the sociological interest in love and its relation to social structures and practices is inflected by feminist thinking and activism, especially the radical politicisation of heterosexual love which took part in the latter part of the twentieth century. Although it has been argued that feminism 'lapsed into silence on the experience of love' under the influence of 'identity politics' within the women's movement during the second half of the 1990s and the major concern for feminists became the oppressive and destructive nature of heterosexuality, the field continues to be oriented and heavily influenced by the critical analysis of love as a cultural form which feminism instigated (Langford, 1999: 7).

### **The sociology of love as an emotion**

One way to begin to map the basic themes and arguments within the sociological study of love is to organise them around a sociological conceptualisation of love. The first question to which I turn then is, in those comparatively rare cases where sociologists are particularly interested in the ontology of love, how do they define the object of enquiry and to what aspects of the socio-cultural do they direct their attention in seeking to understand its constitution?



I will focus here on two accounts, given by James Averill (1985) and Stevi Jackson (1993) because, as Jackson suggests, of the degree of attention which they pay to the specific problem of defining love. It is important to note that both these accounts focus on the configuration of love within the specific cultural context of western societies. This is of course germane in relation to the research described and analysed in this thesis. However, we should be alert to this specificity especially given the debate, present within both sociology and anthropology, about the extent to which particular forms of love may be restricted to specific cultures. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, there is good evidence that romantic love and the forms that emerge with its decline are closely associated with the conditions of modernity in industrial and post-industrial western capitalist societies. However, some sociologists maintain that this link means these particular configurations are restricted to these societies which display these conditions while others contest this claim. For example, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gersheim (1995) maintain that the configuration of love with which Averill and Jackson are concerned is only possible under the social conditions in advanced capitalist society, while Charles Lindholm (1999) suggests that, while they may not be universal, these forms of love may only be a specific configuration of a wider phenomenon. Furthermore, Lindholm argues that similar configurations may be possible as means to negotiate different sets of social relations and conditions.

Averill and Jackson's accounts have similarities, as I will illustrate, but they also diverge in terms of the extent to which they are concerned not only to situate their conceptualisation of love within an array of socio-cultural influences but to explore

these in any depth. They both identify culture, discourse and cultural representations of love, social structure and the kinds of states of subjectivity that these make available as important factors which contribute to the conceptualisation of love. However, Averill and Jackson's accounts pursue these connections in different directions and to a different degree. Jackson is certainly interested in developing a conceptualisation of love but more interested in exploring how it is bound into the construction of gender and gender inequalities, and discourses and narratives of romance than James Averill. In contrast, while Averill refers to these factors he does not explore them in any depth. He is more firmly engaged in arguing for the social construction of emotion using love as an example. In essence then, these are overlapping accounts, sharing a view on the influence of socio-cultural factors on love but having different emphases in terms of where their interest lies in elaborating them.

Averill describes love, like other emotions, as an interpretation of experience which draws heavily on cultural resources and ideals. These are 'not the building blocks out of which one can create a love relationship...but can be likened to a set of blueprints or rules for the construction of behaviour' (Averill, 1985: 98). On this basis he proceeds to deconstruct love through an analysis of some of its key components – idealisation, suddenness of onset, physiological arousal and commitment. His argument runs along the line that each aspect of this syndrome is subject to social influence. For example, idealisation is conditional on an evaluative appraisal that the object of one's love is worthy and unique, and that forming an attachment with her/him can help to further the integration of what are experienced as disassociated aspects of the self. A strong sense of the individual, albeit a fragile subjectivity, is a

sine qua non for this process and this, argues Averill, is not a given but an outcome of social and cultural conditions which produce this kind of subjectivity. He argues that suddenness of onset is equally social in character. It requires the presence of a psychological fluidity or instability, personal and possibly situational motivations allied to a social script (in this case 'love at first sight'). He sees cultural representations of romantic narratives as the principal site where these scripts repose. He is suspicious about claims that love's physiological aspects – the 'beating heart' and 'butterflies in stomach' – suggest that it has a biological basis. He argues that to attribute specific physiological phenomena to love or to cite them as its cause is an illusion created by discourse which associates physiology and psychology through shared symbolic meanings. He does not suggest that the bodily feelings are not real but that it is through discourse that we discern them as preceding the socially informed processes of appraisal. Finally, Averill argues that commitment is also socially scripted. As he powerfully puts it,

The statement 'I love you' whether spoken or merely implied, is not the expression of some primitive impulse, a kind of civilised moan of sexual excitement. Nor is it an inference based vaguely on felt bodily changes, interpreted in terms of situational cues. Rather the person who says 'I love you' is indicating a willingness and desire to enter into a certain kind of relationship, and if the statement is sincere, to meet the obligations as well as to enjoy the privileges associated with that relationship.

(Averill, 1985: 106)



Stevi Jackson's (1993) approach is, as I have said, different in emphasis to Averill's but shares the central thesis. For her, love is no more asocial than it is for Averill. She sees it as buried somewhere in amongst layers of constitutive culture: 'the ideals and hopes of personal fulfilment, commitment, companionship and affection' are overlaid with superficial elements, the conventions of romance, and the importance of romantic love in the formation and maintenance of heterosexual identity and the social institution of the couple and marriage (Jackson, 1993: 207)

Her analysis progresses by stripping each of these layers away and examining them in turn. Jackson shares Averill's view that it is through discourse that we derive the impression that emotions are located deep down in the individual. However, her attention to the linguistic construction of love is primarily focused on the 'scripts' provided by cultural representations of romance. Whereas Averill simply alludes to these 'scripts', Jackson tells us precisely where she believes that we can find them, writing about 'those who feel themselves to be 'in love' hav[ing] a wealth of novels, plays, movies and songs on which to draw to make sense of and describe their passion' (Jackson 1993: 212). It is through these culturally embedded narratives, she suggests, that individuals learn what love is and learn how to participate in it. She pays particular attention to the relationship between gender and these cultural representations and narratives of romance. Jackson explores at length the different salience of these representations for women and men and how they contribute to the construction of gender-specific subject positions in relation to love. She argues that while they are available to both women and men, the configurations of the relationships between gender and emotion mean that they are embraced by women as a means of establishing femininity but regarded with suspicion by men for whom

they represent a potential threat to their independence and masculine identity. Putting aside the legitimacy of this claim for a moment, what is important here is that Jackson is signalling that love is realised through narratives which are inherently gendered. She also identifies them as a significant cultural resource which comprises scripts through which feelings can be managed and understood and subjectivity developed in ways that bring it that into relationship with the construction of heterosexual coupledness.

The issue of how love and gender interrelate is a theme which circulates throughout Jackson's analysis. For example, she investigates how love is involved in the maintenance of women's subordination to men and hegemonic masculinities. She argues that however naïve they were first- and second-wave feminist analyses of women's investment in love as a product of their material conditions and attempts to find a valued identity and role in a social context which undervalues are important because they signal that love is not an equal enterprise. Love contains a contradiction in that it provides women with a position of potential power but in doing so invites them to subordinate themselves to men. Jackson also alerts us to the changing relationship between love and marriage, and love and sex. Her thesis, reprised by Lynn Jamieson (1998: 23-26), is that while the links between the former are eroding and between the latter altering, love as a basis for both marriage and sex are still potent narratives. Dealing at length with the links between sex and love Jackson identifies how, especially for women, love can legitimise sex. Although these links are, I think, more contested by both women and men than Jackson suggests, what her argument alerts us to is that love can no more be disconnected from any serious consideration of sex than it can from a consideration of gender. Even if conventions

and social practices are changing, these connections continue to represent the background against which change takes place and in relation to which individuals have to negotiate their personal narratives of love.

Along with gender, the relationship between love and the social construction of the subject is a theme running through Jackson's account. There seem to be two related strands to her interest. First, she sees subjectivity as emerging from the processes of working the self into narratives of romance and second, she is interested in subjective experience of love. For Jackson these dimensions of the interlocking of love with subjectivity are crucial since it is only through love's involvement in the construction of identity that we can begin to understand the personal emotional experiences that it entails; Love's rawness, viscosity, power and some of its apparent contradictions. For Jackson these dimensions exceed the accounts which are made possible by the conceptualising love solely as a response to or process of negotiation through the array of cultural conventions, narratives and positions which she has been identifying. Hence, love is coupled both to the provision of a means to create narratives through which the self can emerge and to account for its complexities. The focal issue here is that while love is a means to advance the realisation of the subject through its investments and idealisation of an object, these processes also threaten it. The subject becomes dependent on the recognition offered by its object for its existence.

I have privileged these two analyses within this review arguing that they represent particularly useful resources for the identification of some the main points of orientation and concern within the sociological study of love. They serve to alert us



to the basic premise about love's cultural and social embeddedness, how it is associated with narratives and discourses and cultural conventions, how it connects to relational institutions such as marriage and also how it is inextricably bound into the production and maintenance of states of subjectivity. They also illustrate how these issues are bound up with gender especially the organisation and power relations involved in the construction and maintenance of hegemonic heterosexuality. An elaboration of these themes is the next task to which I turn in this chapter.

### **A history of love**

Averill and Jackson's assertions about the way that love is linked into and produced by social structures and discourses rely heavily on the substantiating evidence provided by the sociological project of writing a history of love. Like the sociology of emotion, this project reflects and contains debates about the extent to which love is entirely a cultural construction or in part has a biological basis which is mediated by socio-cultural factors. However, I would argue that these need not be a diversion to this exploration because not only is the debate not so central to this project but, again paralleling the sociology of emotion, whatever the scope of disagreement on the ontology of love there is consensus that the meanings that it acquires and the practices that it involves are qualitatively different between cultures and within cultures at different times in their histories. Whether love is constructed or influenced by aspects of the socio-cultural context it is always seen to serve social functions and fulfil purposes in terms of producing, reproducing and resisting social orders and structures (Averill, 1985; Dion and Dion, 1996; Jankowiak, 1995).

A wealth of sociological evidence has built up which suggests that love in the modern era is a relatively recent configuration of basic desires for intimacy, and emotional attachment combined with sexual attraction (Giddens, 1992; Jackson, 1993; Langford, 1999; Luhmann, 1986). This is a conclusion reached on the basis of research which has made powerful arguments for the dependency of the forms and functions of love, the social practices with which it is associated and ultimately the feelings with which it is associated on social structure and the kinds of subjectivity that these structures make available to people. As social structures change, and along with it the potential kind and degree of subjectivity available to the individual, so to has what love means and what it involves (Bertilsson, 1986; De Rougement, 1983; Giddens, 1992; Heng, 2003; Jamieson, 1998; Langford, 1999).

As Mary Evans has noted, 'every history of love...begins with an account of homoerotic love in classical Greece' (Evans, 1999: 270). Margereta Bertilsson (1986) identifies traces of the influence of platonic theory on Judeo-Christian thought; in particular its promotion of love as an ideal which is capable of separating men (sic) from mere mortals with physical desires and connecting them to higher virtues of goodness, truth and beauty. Bertilsson suggests that attempts by organised religion to spiritualise love and to segregate it from sexual desire had a far-reaching influence and that the resonances with cosmic fate, transcendence and ecstasy with which it is still freighted are associated with these early attempts to manipulate the concept. In addition, she emphasises the interlocking of love with gender in ways which inform subsequent conceptualisations by excluding women from its higher forms and connecting them more to the biological, sexual and natural world. Like Evans, Bertilsson suggests that the presence of women as love objects and the

'heterosexualisation' of love emerges with the idealisation of love through chivalric romances composed in the Middle Ages. This highly stylised, literary form of love, present only initially among the aristocracy, involves the idolisation of women although its focus is very much on the heroic warrior exploits of men. Through deeds and trials, fantastic quests and battles, knights seek to win a woman's favour. Joanne Brown (2002) has neatly summarised the trajectory of these accounts as being about a knight's love for a noble and inaccessible lady,

The Knight devotes himself to the Lady whose inaccessibility keeps his passion and torment aflame. This is a love that cannot be consummated and it facilitates an unrealistic idealisation of the beloved and fuels the propensity for passion and strong emotion. It is a transcendent, chaste love that is not earthly and never leads to union with the beloved. This is a type of love that leads to a loss of self, because one's whole being is consumed by thoughts and desires for that which is strongly idealised and forever unattainable.

(Brown, 2002: 30)

It has been claimed that this conceptualisation of love begins to expand and reach first into court and then society more widely as ballads and poems which extol it are disseminated by troubadours. It has even been suggested that these, 'Provençal poets were responsible for the formation of the Western code of love: they invented love as a way of life alongside the invention of lyric poetry' (Featherstone, 1999: 2). Despite this grand claim that the chivalric code of romantic love sets the tenor for everything that follows, it is important not to overstate its reach at this time. It is a culture of the court and castle, not the feudal serfdom and although it provides women with a new



level of recognition by locating them as the objects of men's exultant, blissful and purified love, it does not seem radically to destabilise the practices of arranged marriages and the social and economic subordination of women to men. Indeed, love and marriage are not co-terminus at this point in time. If it does in some way 'invent love as a way of life', as Mike Featherstone claims, then it is by heralding the beginning of a process of situating love as in some respects counter to the prevailing social constraints of gender relations, class and highly stratified social relationships.

These twin themes of the emergence of the individual (and especially women) through this form of love and its potential as a means of resistance to the controls imposed by rigid social structures and the practices with which they are associated, are picked up in the development of love in later court society. For example, Norbert Elias (1985) has written about the claustrophobic conditions of life within Louis XIV's royal court at Versailles and suggests that the promise of spontaneity and self-expression offered by an increasingly romanticised form of this love represented relief from the stifling demands for self-control and regulation imposed by court life. The power of love to corrode social barriers becomes more evident. What had been seeded in the practice of socially inferior troubadours singing their medieval romances to aristocratic women finds fruition as courtiers look to romance with their trusted social inferiors among whom they perceive a more earthy, naturalistic and expressive capacity for love.

It is this disruptive potential of love that becomes central to its representation within literature in the eighteenth century. As Mary Evans (1999) has demonstrated through her study of the prose of the period, love and especially romantic passion are

frequently described as suspect. They are opposed to rationality and seen as having the power to lead both women and men astray, raising expectations on which they love fails to deliver. As she puts it, writing about Jane Austen's novels, 'romance is foolish and illusory, while the idea of romantic love is suspect' (Evans, 1999: 265). In a sense Austen is working out a new set of contradictions with which love had become associated. As Jacqueline Sarsby (1983) has observed, romantic love is predicated on the notion of the 'thunderbolt' and the lover's powerlessness to resist but this is in tension with situating love as a condition for marriage. Hence Stevi Jackson (1993) has argued that romantic narratives must end when the heroine becomes a bride since passionate romantic love and the long-term commitment and affection required by marriage are incompatible. For Evans, the 'project' of the time becomes harnessing and shackling this potentially wild and passionate love to the formation of harmonious and happy couples, to 'good' marriages, households and families (Evans, 1999: 271). The route to this end is made more complex because love raises questions about, and places new demands on, gender relations. Through romantic love women can exercise choice; the claim that she does not love a man is irrefutable and brooks no opposition – it creates a field of interest which is feminine. At the same time it requires of men the demonstration of atypical masculine traits – the expression of care, attentiveness, fidelity and commitment – in order to woo their lover and get them to the altar. Once there normal service can be resumed and male and female insensitivities and sensitivities can, respectively, be restored.

It has been argued that this passionate, romantic love becomes increasingly ascendant during the period of industrialisation (Bertilsson, 1986; Jamieson, 1998: 17-18). As previously relatively stable, agrarian life is disrupted by the process of

urbanisation and industrialisation, the intimacies and social support provided by kin, community and religious ties and the rigidity of social structure and stratification begin to dissolve. The particular form of disclosing intimacy within a couple that is so central to passionate, romantic love and which was previously neither possible nor desired becomes a rich resource within which new social ties, bonds and identities can be forged.

With the spread of capitalism into personal life the couple, united in affection and situated at the centre of a family, becomes the cultural ideal. It is conceptualised as the repository of and defined by its role as the principal location for the formation of emotional ties, intimacy, empathy, care and love. As a consequence, love becomes even more closely associated with marriage, and emotional and economic companionship although as yet it is neither highly sexualised nor perceived as a prerequisite for coupledness. Through its structuring into marriage it helps to bind women and men together in reciprocal roles as 'bread-winner' and 'home-maker'. However, as David Shumway (2003) notes, 'this shift in cultural values does not necessarily mean either that marriages suddenly become more passionate...or that romance ruled the emotional world without opposition' (Shumway, 2003: 19). Shumway suggests that conceptions of love and marriage remain somewhat divided. While he cites the evidence of letters and diaries from the early Victorian period to demonstrate that romance was the dominant discourse used by lovers to describe their feelings, he suggests that religious and marriage manuals advice books warned against its potential to delude and depicted the ideal marriage as 'something like a business arrangement' (Shumway, 2003: 19). He concludes that while romance is



ascendant as the basis for marriage, it is jockeying with concepts derived from companionate marriage, and traditional social and economic considerations.

Subsequently, and especially in the last 50 years, changes in the labour market, the weakening of rigid gender roles, the increasing economic independence of women and the uncoupling of love and sex through the widespread availability of contraception, destabilises the premise on which this love relationship is founded.

Love is no longer the corollary of marriage but a means to self-realisation. In fact if it leads to marriage at all it is only because it is through this union that couples can enter into what has been termed an ongoing 'marital conversation', in which 'the partners 'discover' themselves and the world, 'who they really are', and 'what they really believe', and have always felt, about so-and-so' (Berger and Berger, 1983: 168).

As the rise of mass consumerism and globalisation lead to greater individualism and social isolation, love becomes both commodified and simultaneously sanctified (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Luhmann, 1986). No longer is it dependent on, nor does it necessarily lead to, the long-term projects of marriage and the enduring couple at the centre of family life but instead becomes a means both to find and sustain the self. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim argue that people's sense of stability of identity was eroded by the collapse of industrial society, growth of competition in the labour market and increased mobility. As life becomes empty and soulless love becomes the 'new religion'; 'a faith quickly finding followers in a society of uprooted loners'(Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 173). Losing its prior purposes as means of forging marriages or sealing dynastic lineage, love's new

function is to satisfy emotional needs for closeness, for disclosure and for intimacy and it can ebb and flow within the project of mutual engagement in self-exploration and elaboration. As Wendy Langford has noted, 'emotional attachment between sexual partners formed through 'falling in love' ...has increasingly come to be understood as the basis of ...relationship[s]' (Langford, 1999: 3).

Severely attenuated as it is, this account of the sociological history of love serves several purposes. It provides some context for Averill and Jackson's accounts of love as an emotion. It also begins to demonstrate more precisely how, from a sociological perspective, love is envisioned as inextricably tied to social structure and the practices. It demonstrates how love articulates the resources which specific social and material conditions make available and provides people with a means of negotiating them. It also highlights how love interlocks with companion discourses and power relations especially as they pertain to gender and the emergence of forms of subjectivity which are highly individualised.

One distinctive feature of this historical perspective is the proposition it contains about the increasing democratisation of love. That is, as Niklas Luhmann (1986: 156-159) argues, through historical processes the cultural codes which identify love as a means to individual fulfilment have become increasingly available to the population as a whole. This is similar to Ulrich Beck's and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's assertion that 'love as an encounter of egos, as a recreation of reality in terms of you-me...is becoming a mass phenomenon' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 184).

However, not only is this process not smooth, with one set of cultural conventions, practices and potential meanings simply supplanting another, but also the extent to

which at any time one particular array of conventions, practices and potential meanings is equally available to all the individuals and groups within a society is contested (Featherstone, 1999). As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) suggest, as lovers become freer to determine their own relationships so too are they required to engage in more and more demanding work to replace the stability which came from relationships framed within patriarchal industrial society with their own social framework.

A crucial issue within sociology then is to what extent the previous dominant narrative of love compiled through romance is extant and influential, and how it has been reconfigured or abandoned for the discourses and practices of post-modern democratic love. If the social context is changing, and relational possibilities and forms of loving altering alongside them, how far has this process gone? Who is its vanguard and who left behind? And, specifically, how do young people envision, experience and enact their relationships and loves in this context?

In order to address these crucial questions in relation to the literature around young people's relationships and experiences of love, it is necessary to examine more closely the dialogue that has opened up between romance and whatever forms of love are coming after it.

### **Love and romance**

As I have shown, sociology sees romantic love as an ideal which is inserted into the emergent ties between freedom and self-realisation which begin to appear during the eighteenth century. The concept of romantic love, as Averill and Jackson propose, is



bound into a particular narrative form. Jackie Stacey and Lynne Pearce (1995) provide a good overview of this narrative identifying the main constituents of this 'script' and noting that it 'extend[s] beyond the Hollywood screen or the supermarket paperback and into the stories we tell ourselves (however much reformulated) about our past, present and future romantic relationships or lack of them' (Stacey and Pearce, 1995: 15). In its classical form romance is the story of a quest for a love union between a woman and man. It revolves around the overcoming of various obstacles and barriers, and the fulfilment (or equally the loss) of a transcendent and transfiguring love. As Stacey and Pearce put it, the classic romantic trajectory involves a 'first sighting' which 'ignites the necessary 'chemistry' between the protagonists and the overcoming or circumnavigation of obstacles which may be physical, social or a 'clash of personalities which may itself be the narrative problem' (Stacey and Pearce, 1995: 16). The notions of love as both transcendent and transfiguring are central to the narrative. Stacey and Pearce argue that this not only involves transcending these obstacles (including even death) but the transformation of both the female and male characters. The romantic script offers up the possibility of being someone else through the encounter and ultimate fusion of the self and the other.

Stacey and Pearce also alert us to the profound ways that the romantic narrative interlocks with the construction of gender and sexuality. Although both the heroine and hero may be transformed by love, this transformation only serves to reinforce their gendered identities and highlight the different ways in which women and men can access and position themselves in relation to romance. For women, romantic love may involve the discovery of themselves but this is only possible through loving a

man. The hero may temporarily be put in touch with a 'softer' side of his character by this love but this ends with the conclusion of his pursuit of the woman and their arrival at marriage or sexual union. There is no 'sequel' to the romantic quest for men in the same way as there is for women resulting in disappointment with men's failure to sustain the 'romantic personality' beyond this point (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; Langford, 1999).

Stacey and Pearce recognise that the basic trajectory of this 'classical' romantic narrative is subject to a great deal of variation and share the views of other scholars that it is under increasing pressure particularly from both feminist critiques and the destabilisation of heterosexuality by the public emergence and recognition of same-sex relationships (Collecott, 1995; Thynne, 1995). Stacey and Pearce also note that the romantic narrative is not equally available to people of all classes and ethnicities leading them to suggest that romance might best be thought of as 'in process' and questioning whether its 'revision' and 'rewriting' means that it can even be regarded as a homogenous discourse at all (Stacey and Pearce, 1995:24). However, they also concede its continuing relevance, power and allure. They identify an interesting tension at its heart; on the one hand, if romance has common meaning 'across the multiple discourses and practices of contemporary culture, then it is its continued inscription as a narrative (romance is "always already" a story)' yet there is no longer a 'single (foundational) story' to which the multiplying narratives of romance refer. 'In different texts/contexts, the structural properties of classical romance – action, sequence, contexts, closure – have been radically dislocated. Things do not happen in the expected order any more, the roles/actions of the protagonists are being

challenged by the specificities of gender, class, race and sexuality' (Stacey and Pearce, 1995: 37).

These tensions are still very much in evidence, 12 years after Stacey and Pearce wrote about them, as Elisabeth Peel and Rosie Harding's (2004) review of the debate about the merits and disadvantages of recognising lesbian and gay relationships through marriage and civil partnerships demonstrates. As they note, commenting on the romantic discourse, it 'is useful for heightening heterosexuals' awareness of lesbian and gay couples by making lesbian and gay relationships look familiar, but is problematically wed to heteronormativity and consumerism' (Peel and Harding, 2004: 595).

One forceful explanation for this diffusion and collapse of the romantic narrative is that it is exhausted through over-exposure. As Eva Illouz (1997; 1999) has argued, it has become subject to contestation through the emergence of a 'realist' alternative for describing and enacting relationships. Based on responses to a series of vignettes portraying three different kinds of love story, including a traditional romantic 'love at first sight' account, an account which she describes as a 'residual' version in which love arises through negotiations between a couple brokered by their families, and an 'emergent' account in which emotional attachment and investment is combined with financial and professional concerns, Illouz (1999: 164) concludes that people utilise these narratives for different explicative purposes in relation to their own experiences of relationships and regard them as differently but equally plausible accounts. Among participants in her study the classically romantic account was generally both regarded with suspicion because it was too unrealistic and also seemed to take place



too quickly for the gathering of the mutual knowledge assumed necessary for the formation of a lasting and successful relationship. The second and third accounts were regarded, in contrast, and at least initially, as much more plausible. The relationship between the protagonists unfolded more slowly and was based on considered judgement including taking into account of the personality of the other as well as the prospects created by material conditions for the formation and maintenance of a stable, long-term relationship. However, when the focus of Illouz's questioning shifted to asking which account respondents preferred, it was the more implausible and fantastic romance that they tended to choose. They also used the same narrative frame to structure accounts of their own most 'memorable' experiences of love. Illouz suggests that this reflects the organisation of the reality of relationships around two poles 'one enacting the highly aestheticized, theatrical and stylized properties of 'adventure', and the other exhibiting the continuous and shapeless flow of everyday life; one motivated by the drive towards excitation, the other by the drive towards comfort' (Illouz, 1999: 174). She suggests that reference to both, and therefore occupation of potentially contradictory views by her respondents, reflects the fact that the construction of love requires the 'extraordinary' account as real life is too 'fuzzy' and diffuse without this. Most importantly, Illouz asserts that people account for and manage this discrepancy by seeing it not as an existential dilemma but as a by-product and appropriation of romance by the mass media. As she puts it, 'because of the ubiquitous use of romance to sell commodities, romance in real life has become an empty form, acutely conscious of itself as code and cliché. We have become deeply aware that, in the privacy of our words and acts of love, we rehearse cultural scenarios that we did not write' (Illouz, 1999: 293). People see themselves as instilled with unrealistic and over-fabricated models and

narratives of love and hence the 'media-saturated culture deepens and complicates the relation between the ways in which we sustain our experience and the codes that are available to us to construct such experience' (Illouz, 1999:183).

### **Love, relationships and post-modernity**

As both Stacey and Pearce suggest and Illouz demonstrates, the romantic narrative is under pressure but resilient. It is becoming more diffuse, less freighted with self-evident meanings and its links to sex, marriage and commitment fractured. It is becoming suspect through over-exposure. Yet, as these same authors note, it still continues to exercise a powerful influence over the everyday social practices through which people 'do' falling and being in love. What then is replacing it as a means of constituting, understanding and enacting love? It is at this point that it is useful to return to a fuller exploration of the thesis about the democratisation of love since it is through this process that these new cultural forms and practices are seen to be emerging as means to manage this relational fluidity and the apparently contradictory positions offered by romance. Perhaps the most forceful and influential account of this process and the possibilities that it has generated has been offered by Anthony Giddens (1992). His thesis is that intimacy has been transformed in late modernity. He suggests that new social conditions which are characteristic of late modernity have heightened the sense that individuals have creative power to produce their subjectivity and the social world around them. These changes, which he charts elsewhere, are rooted in globalisation, disembeddedness, an enhanced sense of risk and the dominance of experts and abstract systems (Giddens, 1994). As a result, the individual is required to engage in a continuing construction of the 'narrative of self'. Relationships have become a key site for this project. Pointing chiefly to the



influence of feminism on gender divisions and expectations, and other social changes, including the emergence of alternative sexualities, practices and the collapse of marriage as a determinant of love, Giddens argues that love has been cut free from sexuality and reproduction and has become associated more closely with the 'reflexive project of self': 'Love presumes some degree of self-interrogation. How do I feel about the other? How do I feel about me?' (Giddens, 1992: 44). Instead of romantic love which ties women to motherhood and monogamy, contemporary culture enables people to seek love relationships for their own sake as a means of dialogue with each other and with themselves. This increased emphasis on intimacy has led to the emergence of the 'pure' relationship, a 'social situation entered into for its own sake...and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each to stay within it' (Giddens, 1992: 58). This concept, Giddens argues, facilitates a shift away from romantic love and its idealisation and projections towards confluent love; an active and contingent love which,

Presumes equality in emotional give and take, the more so the more any particular love tie approximates closely to the prototype of the pure relationship. Love here only develops to the degree to which intimacy does, to the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to the other.

(Giddens, 1992:62)

This is an equitable form of relating in which sex has new place, as a gauge of confluence through which individuals demonstrate their capacities to give and



receive pleasure, which is not by definition heterosexual, but which requires a sense of difference only to the extent of their being a self and other which might be known through it.

This view is not without its critics, however, who question Giddens' optimism. They suggest that he fails to take sufficiently into account the continued influence of gender differences in terms of both expectations and practices within heterosexual relationships. Wendy Langford (1999), for example, cites studies which show that women and men still forge relationships with different expectations about roles, disclosure and intimacy, and that, in general, women's hopes and desires for continuing validation and emotional reciprocity from men are largely disappointed (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; Mansfield and Collard, 1988). In a similar vein, Lynn Jamieson argues that to suggest that sexual interaction is shifting free from its connections with gender and power ignores research that demonstrates that 'mutual sexual pleasure, equality and deep intimacy are...outweighed by sex and gender trouble' (Jamieson, 1999: 484). As she points out, participation in the family and the household remain sites of profound gender inequality. She is also critical of the narrowness of Giddens' definition of intimacy pointing to the fact that for 'couples who live together, the time, money and effort each devotes to their household often symbolises love and care for the other' (Jamieson, 1999: 485). Jamieson concludes that the fragility of heterosexual relationships may not be a reflection of judgements about the exhaustion of confluence but in fact partly a result of pressures to live up to its ideals. As she puts it, it is 'more plausible to see the fragility of heterosexual couples as a consequence of the tension between strengthening cultural emphasis on intimacy, equality and mutuality in relationships and the structural supports of

gender inequalities which make these ideals difficult to attain' (Jamieson, 1999: 486). In a sense these criticisms highlight the ongoing dialogue in the context of people's lived experience of relationships between romantic and 'pure' forms of love. These criticism suggest that the weaknesses in Giddens' analysis are rooted in his failure to take into account the pervasiveness of structural inequalities in gender relations which provide, in part, the grounds for the survival of romantic love.

### **Young people, love and relationships**

How are these debates to be deployed in relation to understanding young people's experiences and enactment of love? The potency and fracturing of the romantic narrative is evident in the research presented in this thesis. This suggests that young people's investments in the classical romantic narrative and their engagement with the scripts and practices that it offers them are ways of understanding and inserting meaning into their emotional experiences. As the work of Stevi Jackson (1993), Valerie Walkerdine (1984), Bronwyn Davies (1989), Janice Radway (1987) and Angela McRobbie (1982, 1991, 2004) has demonstrated, romance is still peddled as an ideal through the mass media, especially to young women. Through the narratives portrayed in printed and other mass media they continue to learn that the heterosexual relationship is constituted through romance. Even with the decline of romantic fiction in teenage magazines it has been suggested that the central ideas about how gender and relationships are configured through romantic love and in relation to masculinities and heterosexuality are still very present in other forms of cultural representation. For example, Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff (2006) persuasively argue that although the contemporary romance for young women colloquially termed 'chick lit' seems to suggest a more liberated attitude to

relationships and especially to sex among their female protagonists, the narratives in fact frequently involve what they term the 'revirginising' of the heroine when she encounters the hero. Not only is her sexual past swept away but also, by implication, her emotional past. These narratives remain at heart resolutely romantic:

With him they return to what we might characterise as an emotionally virginal state, which wipes away previous 'sully' experiences by making them enjoy sex fully for the very first time, or which allows them to 'admit' their sexual timidity or inexperience after previously having boasted about their sexual expertise...It would seem, then, that the codes of traditional romance are reinstated 'through the backdoor' with what we call 're-virginisation', and further that chick lit, like traditional romance, offers precisely the promise of transcendent love and sexual satisfaction.

(Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006: 494)

Romance is also still actively promoted through other means. As Debbie Epstein (1997) has illustrated its narrative and conventions may be structured into children's and young people's lives through institutional practices. In reporting a description of a 'mock wedding' staged during a primary class lesson in the mid-1980s, she illustrates how participation in conventional romantic practices can be enforced on young people. Despite the resistance of the young woman in this account, she notes that, through a performance of an important convention of romance, both gender relations and heterosexuality are expressed:



Here we see the mutual reinforcement of compulsory heterosexuality and of conventional gender relations inescapably intertwined. The playing out of the heterosexual marriage ceremony in its traditional (white, British) form with ‘an imaginary aisle and...confetti and things thrown at them’ assumes the desirability of marriage and institutionally heterosexist forms of relating, and reinforces the fantasies of imaginary futures which children (and particularly girls) often express.

(Epstein, 1997: 106)

While these sources generally highlight the salience of romance to young women, there is also good evidence of its influence on the relationship practices and associated emotional experiences of young men. For example, Peter Redman (2002) has reported how some young men describe the processes of forming relationships with young women and especially falling in love in terms of a quest referring to obstacles and barriers which they have to surmount, how they enter into conventions such as ‘sinking to their knees’ when asking a girl to go out with them; and, reprising Duncombe and Marsden (1995), how they staged romance around specific events. Redman writes about transformative force of these experiences highlighting how some of the young men that he interviewed found love to be ‘something through which they had found their true or better selves’ adding that this ‘echo[es] a common theme of the romance genre, that romantic love is healing and transfiguring...The romantic hero finds his true, gentler self only in the love of the right woman and a commitment to a shared domestic life, configured conventionally by marriage’ (Redman, 2002: 64).

In addition, Redman emphasises the way that enactment of these romantic conventions and the structuring of experience through their narrative possibilities also involve the gendering of women as well the exploration and elaboration of young men's own masculinities. He notes that some male interviewees constructed their female paramours as 'pure', virginal, sexually naive or inexperienced, and needing care as well as beautiful, shy and vulnerable opening up the possibility for the young men to become strong and capable.

As these allusions to sex and sexuality contained in these observations suggest romance also continues to play an important role in configuring young people's sexual behaviour. In this context the romantic discourse is seen to occupy a complex and sometimes contradictory position in relation to the practices of sexual intimacy because it both creates possibilities for the (temporary) abandonment of the constraints of strictly gendered identities but is also involved in invoking them. There has been a wealth of research which has explored how young people understand, experiences and activate love in relation to their sexual experiences and practices. It is a body of work which was galvanised by public health concerns about HIV and Aids which emerged during the mid 1980s and endured as important drivers of public policy until the mid 1990s. As a consequence, much of this research is concerned with the specific question of how love and romance are involved in the young people's negotiation of 'safer' sexual behaviour in the context the power differentials within heterosexual relationships. Love is generally envisioned here as disadvantaging young women in their attempts to negotiate the timing and nature of sexual interaction with young men and also presenting an obstacle to taking steps to practise 'safer' sex (Gavey et al., 1999; Gebhardt et al., 2003; Holland et al., 1991;

Holland et al., 1998; Pilkington et al., 1994). This work also alerts us to the centrality of penetrative sex as the means by which heterosexual love may be expressed although it occupies a somewhat ambivalent position as either a consequence of sexual interaction or as a motive for it. As Janet Holland et al. (1998) have forcefully argued, the disconnection of love, sex, romance and commitment from marriage and religion permits young people to recombine these discourses in new ways but the potential diversity of these new combinations is always contained within the powerful and resilient 'gendered languages of heterosexuality' (Holland et al., 1998: 104).

The relationship between sex and love is framed by heterosexuality which is seen to produce the 'public truths' that young women are interested in love and young men in sex. This distinction plays an important role in maintaining masculinity and male power by reserving male expressions of vulnerability and female expressions of sexual desire for the private realm of the relationship. In this context, the conventions of romantic love become a means of managing this division for young women. Love may become eroticised, a displaced expression of lust, control and commitment – 'a fluid language for the expression of frustrated desire' (Holland et al., 1998: 100). In these ways sex can become legitimised for young women and, as Holland et al. suggest, this is an act of resistance through which they seek to disrupt the division of love and sex. However, the 'problem with love is that it can still lead a young woman into 'being used', gaining a bad reputation, getting pregnant or being abandoned' as young men retain control over the public discourse about the relationship between sex, love, gender and heterosexuality (Holland et al., 1998: 101). Consequently, while young women 'fear' sex but can find ways to accommodate and engage in it



through romance, young men, publicly, remain fearful of love. It can, as some of the young men in Peter Redman's study reported, be transformative and lead to the pleasures of self-exploration through intimacy and disclosure but it can also threaten their freedom and self-determination. Holland et al. are alerting us to the fact that sex, like other practices associated with romantic love, is configured by the politics of gender relations and heterosexuality. For young people, as with adults, sexual intimacy can be a route to love or an outcome of it but it is never free of these overarching influences.

While these studies suggest that romance still exercises a powerful influence over young people's relationships, they also begin to identify some of the ways that it is being pressurised by the possibilities for 'doing' love in other ways; possibilities created by resources associated with love's democratisation. For example, in analysing young men's investments in romance, Peter Redman (2002) notes that these are neither all-encompassing nor without contradictions. Some young men involved in his study engaged in relationships which were primarily organised around sexual pursuit and conquest, and in these situations they referred not to romantic conventions and narratives but talked about 'copping off with girls at parties and nightclubs – a term which appeared to cover everything from kissing to penetrative sex but which did not necessarily imply a romantic dimensions to the encounter' (Redman, 2002: 66). A similar degree of fluidity in terms of young people's relationship practice and the repertoires drawn on by them to define, describe and enact them has also been noted by Louisa Allen (2004). Referring to data generated through focus group discussions with 92 young people aged between 17 and 19, she illustrates how both young women and men shift between romantic

and other discourses in describing their relationships dependent on their duration, whether the attachment is primarily emotional, sexual or companionate. Allen argues that among these young people there is no simple linear progression from shorter, less 'serious' and primarily sexually motivated relationships to longer, more 'serious' relationships constituted by emotional attachment and investments, rather she describes a sort of 'pick and mix' approach in which young people engage in different kinds of relationships at different times with different motives in mind. Consequently, they deploy different discourses in order to account for and understand them. Allen argues that some forms of relationships parallel those described as 'copping off' by Redman and others are casual and ongoing but not characterised by any committed emotional investment. A third group is primarily organised around mutual emotional attachment, nurture and care. It is in the context of these relationships that romantic discourses are most evident. However, as Allen notes, the narrative is sometimes disrupted by an injection of realism discernable in young people's references to 'experimenting' with a partner in order to identify if there is sufficient emotional compatibility for the relationship to develop further and perhaps even into marriage (Allen, 2004: 472).

A similar trend seems to be evident in the longitudinal study of young people's transitions from childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood undertaken by Sheila Henderson et al. (Henderson et al., 2007; Thomson et al., 2002; Thomson et al., 2004). In many respects their analysis overlaps with that of Redman and Allen. They point to the diversity of young people's relationships and the unstable presence of romance alongside (the pursuit of) confluence in relationships. For example, the influence of romance seems discernable in the rather vague ideals that the



participants in their study hold on to around love being connected to the achievement of a settled state of coupledness, marriage, family life and parenthood. However, the routes towards this future are heavily inflected with 'realist' views and at the point when they reach their late teenage years and early twenties, Henderson et al. observe that,

Most young people did not appear to enter and sustain relationships for the sake of getting married and having children. The majority described various benefits, both psychological, such as having a social or sexual partner, someone to talk to, and to provide security, trust and stability, as well as practical, such as helping with transport and money.

(Henderson et al., 2007: 136)

Henderson et al's., analysis characterises this diversity in terms of three broad kinds of relationship. Some of their interviewees are engaged in what they term 'fusion' relationships. These are characterised by deep mutual emotional investment and the pursuit of reciprocal support and security. These relationships seem to be closest to Giddens' democratic ideals of 'pure' relationships displaying evidence of both young women and men finding sanctuary and the potential for the transformation of the self through mutual disclosure and intimacy. The second tendency is towards 'autonomy' in relationships. As Henderson et al., put it, 'these young people adopted a more instrumental approach to living, facing the uncertainties of the labour market as an individual, unhindered by a close couple relationship that might require time and effort' (Henderson et al., 2007: 141). These relationships might be enduring but were often in tension with educational or work ambitions and liable to be sacrificed if they



obstructed their realisation. The third tendency is towards 'uncommitted' relationships. Here the emphasis is on relationships as a threat to freedom and fun and involving unacceptable levels of emotional vulnerability and compromise in terms of plans for the future and individualism. Relationships of this kind were perceived to be in tension with friendships and reluctance to 'commit' was sometimes associated with experiences of oppressive relationships between parents.

### **'Contingent' love**

It is through these analyses that we can begin to see how the forms that relationships take and the associated practices and experiences of loving might be related to local, personal and circumstantial contingencies which inflect and inform choices and opportunities available to young people for orienting themselves in relation to the potentially competing discourses and conventions of romance and 'democratic' forms of loving. All the scholars cited here are alert to this issue and between them offer a number of overlapping explanations for the diversity of young people's lived experiences.

For example Henderson et al., (2007) point towards the importance of personal biography as a means of understanding the opportunities available to individual young people in terms of forming, understanding and enacting their relationships and identifying the resources on which they can draw to achieve this. Following Giddens, they refer to 'the reflexive ordering of self-narratives' as the means by which identity is constituted, and suggest what narratives are available and accessible and how they can be deployed is determined by the local social and cultural setting (Henderson et al., 2007: 20). Within this they locate 'romantic' relationships as both a resource and

something that is in turn informed by other resources. So, family, education and economic conditions and imperatives both play into experiences of 'romantic' relationships in terms of circumscribing them and in turn represent attempts to mobilise the self in transition through these aspects of context. A particularly interesting concept deployed here is that of 'fate' versus 'choice' which becomes a means of drawing agency into the negotiation and utilisation of these resources. Life events, including 'romantic' relationships, can be seen as arranged along a continuum with fate at one end and choice at the other. Categories such as 'family', 'death and illness' are located towards the 'fate' end of the continuum and 'leisure and consumption towards 'choice'. They argue that young people see events associated with 'fate' as invoking agency only in so far as it relates to responding to or managing them. Agency is perceived to be much more available with regard to events associated with 'choice'. Of course, as Henderson et al. point out, specific events within each category may be positioned at a number of points along this continuum. To take the specific example of relationships, it might be that as a category it sits midway along the continuum but particular events such as forming a new or ending an existing relationship might be experienced as more 'fateful'. This concept is useful in considering how the wider social and cultural resources informing love and relationships are invoked at an individual level since how the events associated with relational context for that feeling are understood depends on the complex and ultimately personal web of inter-related influences and events which make up the continuum. In addition, these events will contribute to the resources available for responding to, understanding and negotiating them and imply how much agency a young person will experience themselves as having in relation to them.

Henderson et al. explicitly identify class, ethnicity, gender and the contours of the social world represented by specific localities as influential on individual experiences, resources and life events. Although they do not elaborate predicatively how these aspects of the social-cultural context will orient and influence personal expectations and experiences of 'romantic' relationships, there is good evidence from other sources supporting their assertion that this influence exists and beginning to explore the forms that it takes.

For example, in Valerie Hey's (1997: 93-102) ethnography of girls' lives, it is apparent that class can have a powerful influence on how young people's relationships are enacted and the meanings with which they can be freighted. Hey is particularly alert to the fact that engagement in romance may be in tension with other aspects of working-class feminine subjectivity and that as a consequence the processes involved in the enactment of romance conventions and narratives may have to be conducted in private. While some of the participants in Hey's study showed themselves publicly as hard and sexually self-confident in dealing with schooling, young men and their female peers, in private, by making sex the currency exchanged for love they used romance as a means of grappling with 'cultural conundrums: 'What is being a proper young woman?' and 'how can you be 'feminine' as a schoolgirl, if you aren't supposed to be sexual?' (Hey, 1997: 97).

The importance of ethnicity and religious belief in determining individual negotiation of love and relationships is particularly evident in other research on young people's views of marriage (O'Donnell, 2000; Sharpe, 1994; 2001a;



2001b). While Sharpe tracks a general trend towards increasing cynicism towards marriage among young people, and especially young women, she notes that young British Asians are more committed to marriage than their white peers and see themselves as marrying within the constraints of their religion and culture and in accordance with the contemporary versions of traditions about parental influence over their choice of partner.

While these scholars can be seen as identifying the importance of structure in introducing contingency to young people's experiences and expectations of relationships and love, Peter Redman goes still further and suggests a great deal of fluidity and diversity in experience is possible within these constraints. For example, writing about the trajectories of young men's relationship experiences as they move through secondary education, Redman emphasises the local and contingent nature of their investments in romantic relationships according to the dynamics of the school structure and peer relationships and the forms of identity that these make available suggesting that '...we should *expect* to see local variations in young people's relationships cultures in response to varying pupils' and formal school cultures, according to the social geography of the locality in which the school is situated, and according to differences in, for example, age, class and ethnicity between pupils' (Redman, 1999: 255)

### **Summary and conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored the sociological literature around love with reference to the arguments about its socio-cultural embeddedness laid out in Chapter One. I have argued that this literature makes a powerful case for seeing love as highly

influenced by socio-cultural context and especially the forms of subjectivity that social conditions and material circumstances make available to individuals. I have described how the literature situates love at the nexus of cultural representations, narratives and discourses, and perceives the production of these and their enactment as linked to social structures and structuration. I have identified strong links between forms of love and the construction of gender and the deployment and resistance of hegemonic masculinities and heterosexuality. I have argued that the sociological study of love tells a story of a shift towards its increasing democratisation and locates contemporary experiences of love and relationships in the context of a tension between a collapsing but still potent ideal of romance and new forms of 'doing' relationships.

In this context I have mounted an examination of some of the academic literature relating to young people's experiences and views of love and relationships tracking these tensions through a variety of studies. I have argued that young people's experiences can be seen as drawing on romantic and other narratives about love and that local social contingencies are one of the factors that determine how they negotiate between these various 'scripts'.

The main questions that this chapter raises for consideration in subsequent chapters relate most closely to this last point: What resources are available to the young people involved in this specific study? What structural, circumstantial and biographical influences mediate and help to determine the nature of these resources? How are they mobilised and with what outcomes in terms of the range of meanings that they enable young people to attach to experience?

## **Chapter three: Research methods and methodology**

### **Introduction**

This chapter has two main aims, first, to describe in detail the methods used to gather the data which form the basis for the analysis and discussion which follows in Chapters four to eight and, second, to examine some of the methodological issues that this process raised. The chapter begins by outlining some of the proposals for the focus and implementation of empirical research made by scholars active in the sociology of emotion. These proposals provide the argument for linking the investigation of the theoretical issues and concerns raised in Chapters Two and Three with a particular approach to empirical research involving the use of qualitative research methods. This introduction also draws attention to some of the potential methodological issues which a sociologist who wishes to study emotion will have to take into consideration.

In the light of these introductory comments I describe the research methods employed in this study. I describe some initial observational fieldwork undertaken in a youth club and how, when I failed to recruit any young people to interviews in this setting, I shifted my attention to a secondary school where I recruited 14 young people to individual interviews and engaged another nine in small group discussions. I describe in depth the processes of recruitment, sampling and data collection involved in the fieldwork in school. I then detail my approaches to coding, analysing and presenting these data. I also describe the ethical considerations raised by the research methods and how I undertook data collection, management and analysis to protect the confidences of participants in this study.



The chapter concludes with a discussion of the methodological issues and problems raised by this study. My main concern here is to examine the ontological status of the interview data paying special attention to the relationship between young people's accounts of their 'serious' relationships and emotions, and the enactment of these as lived experiences. As a consequence I address two specific questions, first, can data generated through interviews be read only as socially constructed texts produced within the interaction context of the interview process, or do they tell us something about social reality beyond this encounter; and, second in what ways are these data shaped by the researcher's presence and participants' perceptions of the researcher's role and interests? In relation to this last point I make some suggestions about why the fieldwork in the youth club and school took on such different trajectories.

### **The socio-cultural approach to the empirical study of emotion**

The central thesis within the sociology of emotion is that emotions are embedded in and shaped by social interaction and they are influenced by structures, discourses and conventions relating to specific historical, social and cultural contexts. As a consequence, it has been argued, that one appropriate approach to progressing the sociological study of emotion involves empirical research which focuses on the micro-social arenas in which individuals' emotional experiences take place and identifying how, in enacting and accounting for these experiences, these individuals draw on the array of resources and influences made available by the wider socio-cultural context (Bendelow and Williams, 1998; Denzin, 2007; Harré, 1986; Hochschild, 1998; Lutz, 1998). Research of this kind is seen as central to supporting the development of theory and forging the connections between what have been

termed, 'personal troubles and the broader public issues of social structure itself' (Bendelow and Williams, 1998: xvii).

It is no surprise given these interests and concerns that sociologists engaged in the study of emotion have adopted a range of qualitative research methods within a paradigm which, it has been argued, is broadly ethnographic (Hochschild, 1979; Lutz, 1982; 1998). That is, sociologists interested in the enactment and experience of emotions have characteristically undertaken research which has involved them in 'participating...in people's daily lives...watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:1). In doing so they have attached importance to the views and meanings associated with emotional experiences and events by research participants seeing them as able to provide insight into social phenomena when brought into dialogue with the 'experience-distant' perceptions and terms of reference which the professional academic employs to forward their own 'scientific, philosophical or practical aims' (Geertz, 1983: 57; 1984).

Despite differences in emphasis and focus sociologists interested in studying emotion have primarily sought to observe and record people's lives, their experiences and the discourses through which they explicate them firsthand. They are committed to generating rich, detailed accounts of emotions and emotional events from the people involved and, where possible, coupling these to observations of the social and institutional practices which are relevant to the emotional enactments being described through qualitative research.



In undertaking this work sociologists have also alerted us to some of the considerations and potential difficulties associated with the use of qualitative research methods to gather data about emotional experience. First, they have alerted us to the potential difficulties which may be involved in gaining access to settings and sites in which it is possible to gather naturalistic data on emotional experiences (Hochschild, 1979; Lutz, 1998). Not only have these settings to be found, but account must be taken of the practical and ethical considerations which arise from the negotiation of entry to them. Second, they alert us to the issue of reactivity, that is the ways that the accounts and actions of participants in research are shaped by their perceptions of the kind of 'audience' that the researcher represents (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 16-17). As William Labov (1972) has demonstrated, accounts are always framed in relation to perceptions of the person to whom they are addressed. They involve processes of recognition (and potentially misrecognition) of what kind of person the interlocutor is and the kinds of resources this makes available to the speaker to construct themselves in ways which they feel to be appropriate and acceptable in terms of maintaining their own sense of identity and responding to the interests and position occupied by the person to whom they are speaking. As Lutz (1998) observes, the same is true for the enactment of emotion. How emotions are expressed and experienced is subject to reactivity in exactly the same ways as speech. What is felt and how it is managed are shaped by perceptions of who is present and their role in relation to the emotional experience and the persons involved in it. Of course, moments of awareness of reactivity are not simply obstructive or problematic, but as Lutz observes, may be useful in making explicit differences in perceptions and what otherwise might have remained unnoticed (Lutz, 1998: 34-40). This is particularly the case in an environment with which a researcher



may be familiar making the suspension of preconceptions by both researcher and research participant much harder to achieve (Coffey, 1999: 42-47).

### **Research settings, access and data generation: The youth club and the school**

In the following section of this chapter I give a detailed account of the methods through which the data presented in this thesis were generated. While this narrative captures the trajectory of the work it is not simply a mirror of reality but it also reflects the ongoing processes of orientating myself within the writing, making sense of my experiences and creating the particular form of text which I perceive that writing a thesis demands (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). As Michelle Fine et al. have observed, this is fundamentally a ‘representational problem’ involving making decisions about how researchers represent themselves and the ‘others’ who figure in their research (Fine et al., 2003: 189). The process of creating this account is also, as Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson have noted, informed by exposure to a variety of other ‘texts’, both academic and fictional, and their sometimes subtle influences on the processes of its composition (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 239-245).

I will describe how I began the process of data collection through an extended period of observational research in a youth club in a small town in Scotland. I opted to work through a youth club assuming that an informal environment would provide opportunities to observe young people’s relationship practices and to interview them both informally and formally about their experiences of these relationships. However, as I will describe I was surprised to find little evidence of young people either enacting or talking about relationships in the youth club and given the time

limitations under which I was operating was obliged to abandon this site and attempts to observe young people's relationship practices and focus instead on identifying a site where I could secure interviews with young people.

## **The youth club**

### *Selection of the youth club and negotiating access*

My fieldwork in the youth club lasted for just over seven months. It began at the end of April and continued until early December 2005. In this period I made a total of 27 visits to the club. I had come into contact with the organisation at the start of year when I met some of the adult volunteers who ran the club at a community event where they had a stall promoting their work. Having worked on the academic literature around sociology and love during the early part of my studentship I was beginning to think about finding a site through which I might begin some fieldwork with young people. The youth club seemed like a good place to start. It was easily accessible and, in my initial informal contact with the adult volunteers, I had referred to my research when questioned about my occupation, and they had seemed interested and also mentioned in passing that they were sure that there were some young people attending the club who were in relationships.

I formally approached the youth club, proposing to undertake some observational research and conduct some group discussions and interviews with young people in which I would ask them about their views and experiences of love and relationships. I suggested that perhaps I might run a workshop on the representation of relationships in the mass media as a way of stimulating interest. I was invited to

come along to the weekly drop-in sessions and meet some of the adult volunteers who ran the club and the young people who attended.

The club was run in a small community centre, which comprised a hall, some offices and a kitchen from which the adult volunteers ran a 'tuck shop'. The weekly session was two hours long taking place in the early evening, and open to any young person aged between 14 and 18. As is typical in many ethnographic studies, I spent the first few weeks trying to negotiate my role as an 'acceptable incompetent' (Lofland and Lofland, 1984: 100). I had had experience of youth work and so while many of the conventions and practices connected with the club were at some level familiar, it nonetheless took time to work out the various roles that volunteers occupied, how they engaged with each other and with young people, what the routines of the drop-in were and where I might fit into them.

These extracts from my fieldnotes, which I routinely wrote up the morning after from notes made during the session, reflect the strain that I felt as I 'faced...the difficult task of rapidly acquiring the ability to act competently...while simultaneously privately struggling to suspend for analytic purposes precisely those assumptions that must be taken for granted in relations with participants'(Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 103).

(21st April 2005) The club feels like a vault – the oppressive atmosphere amplified by the matt-black ceiling dotted with a cluster of small glitter balls, the competing strains of The Undertones versus a racing hardcore number beating out of a computer and the hum of a dozen conversations going on at



once. I attract a few glances as I make my way down the middle of the hall towards the group of half a dozen adults by the servery hatch...I can't get all the faces attached to names. There are four or five women and one man – Majorie and Janice I think and the man is James. James is much older, and introduced as running the sweetie shop and making the tea. There is some playful banter about his tea-making domestication. Max, my contact, introduces me as a new volunteer who is doing some research – 'is it an MA or PhD? – on love and romance'. One of the women, who turns out to be the main organiser of the evening events, lights up. She asks if I'm going to write a Mills and Boon book. She goes on, saying that she's back at college doing an art and design course – she always wanted to return to learning... With the lull I take the club in fully for the first time. There is a number of activities going on. Over by the door three boys have set up a card school – quietly shuffling and dealing and slapping cards down. Just behind them two more boys are playing playstation games on a large black TV bolted to a trolley. It looks like a car race – cartoon vehicles bouncing off flashing scenery. Both are slouched right down in their chairs, feet stretched out to reach the trolley feet. There is a gap then to a computer, standing on an old school desk, at which three young men and a young woman are seated. They are listening to some hardcore of which only the thumping bass and a saw-like melancholic buzzing treble is audible over the other stereo, now playing the Buzzcocks. Further down the room is a table-tennis table. A young man and woman are playing, rather half-heartedly. There must be 40 or 50 young people in this room, now humming with conversations and music. There seem to be about equal numbers of young women and men, mostly clumped into single-sex

groups of three, four or five. The atmosphere is relaxed, chatty; very informal. People are coming and going, some drifting out for a smoke or some chips, others, I learn, probably going home (apparently many of these young people are under parental curfews during school nights). The average age is about 15. There is a few older young people but very few.

My reflections at the end of evening were also, it turned out, prescient in some ways of the problems that I went on to experience in engaging young people with my research. I wrote:

(21<sup>st</sup> April 2005)

It's dark, cool and quiet. I feel excited, pleased and anxious and drawn. It was like intruding on a family event. The club has a momentum, a life of its own; a real little community in which everyone knows everyone else. I was, I felt, invisible. I didn't feel able to force myself in on the little groups of young people; engagement in the rituals of youth worker around tea, and chatter and just hanging out, would be intrusive. I need to grow into this, to build some relationships. The club was just a social event – it doesn't seem to lend itself to big or formal contributions. The contents and thinking behind the submission to the ethics committee feel remote and unrelated to what I have seen and experienced. There is such a strong sense of a way of doing things which I haven't quite fathomed out yet but which is not about workshops, or discussion groups but possibly gentler, more informal forms of interaction.

As these fieldnotes suggest the club was a run entirely by volunteers, some were parents of young people who attended the club and others keen to support a community venture. I discovered as the weeks went by that they organised a loose programme of activities for the club. There would be 'general nights' at which a pool table, table-tennis table, video and board games would be put out. Every second or third week would be a 'themed night' which might involve screening a film, the making and serving of food, a quiz or, if the weather permitted, outdoor activities such as a treasure hunt or a game of rounders.

It was also evident that this was a close knit group. The young people knew each other, as was perhaps inevitable in a small town, and they also knew the adults. Many of them had relationships going back years. It was also evident that the drop-in was a meeting place, undoubtedly important as the only venue in the town available to young people on the night that was open, but not necessarily somewhere they came to for extended periods of time. They might pop in looking for someone or have a game of pool or table tennis and then go away. Although there were a few, perhaps half a dozen, 'regulars' the majority of young people were irregular visitors, and on some nights there might be almost no attendees especially if the club was competing with other social or community events, or taking place during a holiday period.

### *Data collection*

I had decided to progress my fieldwork by observing young people in the club, forming relationships with them through engagement in the activities on offer and thereby hoped to engage them in informal and perhaps formal interviews. As I have



noted above, partly because of my ‘outsider’ status in relation to the community and the intermittent attendance of young people at the club, it quickly became apparent that establishing any relationships would take a long time. In addition, I soon found that I had trouble establishing a role as a researcher rather than a volunteer youth worker. Quite unintentionally as time passed I became identified primarily as another adult volunteer, a role which I felt limited my mobility and restricted the kinds of relationship that I could form with young people. I tried several times to break out of this role by, for example, more overtly writing fieldnotes and distributing copies of the leaflet describing the study again. I also directly asked young people if they would be prepared to talk to me about their views and experiences of love and relationships. This did stimulate some interest, but it always seemed that when a young person or group responded positively something would obstruct my progress. It might be that they would not come back for several weeks, or there would be a ‘themed night’ and no one wanted to miss the opportunity to participate in this to talk to me.

I grew frustrated and matters were not helped by the apparent absence in the club of any observable evidence of the kinds of relationships being formed or enacted that I had expected to find. There were tantalising signs, but none of the overt practices that I had expected, no couples holding hands or kissing, there was not even any overheard talk among young people about relationships. On the few occasions when an avenue of enquiry did open up, I could not pursue it.

These extracts from my fieldnotes for an evening in May and then late June illustrate the kinds of tantalising ways that opportunities for engaging young people in talk presented themselves only to prove ultimately elusive.

(26th May 2005)

I am talking to Martin. He is telling Roger [a volunteer] and me, why he can't come on a trip that Roger is planning. Martin says 'I can't afford it. I've got trips to Norway, Italy and Switzerland this year already. Roger jokes about the extravagance. I ask Martin how come he has so many trips. He says he's off to Norway to see his girlfriend and then a school trip to Italy and a family holiday to Switzerland. I ask him about his girlfriend. He says he has a picture, do I want to see? I do. He opens his 'phone and there is a blurry image of a young woman with long, straight, dark hair, smiling. I ask how they met. He says he was on holiday and they exchanged emails and 'one thing led to another'. I ask how often he sees her then. He says 'not often, she came here in March'. He says he is going to stay with the family. I say to Martin that I would be really interested in hearing about their relationship, for my research. He says he hasn't got time now but maybe when he gets back from the trip to Norway.

This extract follows from an evening in mid June.

(23rd June 2005)

No sign of Martin tonight (again). I thought he would have been back from visiting his girlfriend by now. It's been four weeks. I asked his mates (who

popped in for a game of pool tonight) if they had seen him. None of them had. I didn't want to mention to them in too much detail my interest in catching up with Martin in case they didn't know about his relationship. This is becoming really frustrating. I just get a sense that there are relationships going on among this group of young people – just not here – and now I can't make contact with them again.

Consequently, after six months, somewhat frustrated and disappointed in my progress I agreed with my supervisors to redirect my efforts to secure interviews with young people to another setting. It is important to note that we debated other possibilities for research methods. We discussed the feasibility of finding a sponsor among the young people using the youth club who might take me out of that setting and into the wider community to places where the relationships I had sensed were taking place were being enacted. However, I rejected this course of action concerned that my role and relationships with these young people (and the adult volunteers) were too clearly established within the youth club for me to manage to alter them.

In addition, we discussed what the data I was collecting through the young club were suggesting about the ways that young people's enactment of relationships might be contingent on the opportunities and constraints of particular settings. This was extremely useful in informing my thinking about how young people's relationships may be connected to the negotiation of specific social sites and structures and is reflected in the analytical work presented in the following chapters of this thesis. I was, however, tentatively already forming the hypothesis that relationships are 'done' in different ways in different places; that they might be connected to and



contingent on the opportunities, resources and demands which are present in the different little cultural worlds which young people inhabit (Redman, 1999).

## **The school**

### *Selection of the school and negotiating access*

The selection of the school in which the interviews were conducted was the result of largely pragmatic decisions. Attempts to combine observational research with interviewing young people through the youth club site had yielded no results so I revised my plans. I felt that I needed to move quickly given the length of time I had spent attending the youth club and the timescale for completion of this study and thus decided to abandon the observational research and to focus instead on identifying a site where I might be able to secure interviews with young people.

As a consequence, in January 2006, having obtained the necessary clearance from the Open University Ethics Committee for altering the study protocol, I approached a secondary school with which I had already had some contact. This was a large non-denominational comprehensive, accommodating around 1,000 students aged between 12 and 18, situated on the edge of a town in Scotland. This school was unconnected with the youth club and located in a separate community.

I wrote to the Headteacher early in January 2006 asking for permission to make a presentation to the sixth year about my research and to recruit young people to interviews which I would conduct on site. I suggested approaching the sixth year anticipating that they would have some degree of flexibility in their timetables making it possible to see them without organising permission for them to be

withdrawn from lessons. I was also aware that since these young people would all be at least 16 years of age, I could mount a strong argument for their participation to be on the basis of their informed consent rather than requiring additional levels of 'opt-in' permission from parents or guardians which might further delay recruitment to the study.

In fact, the process was very straightforward. The Headteacher responded to my letter within a few days by 'phone and explained that not only was he happy for me to undertake interviews with young people in the sixth year but had already put into motion plans for me to address the year group through an assembly at the beginning of the following week. He was anxious for me to begin work as soon as possible given that the sixth year would be taking study leave in preparation for their 'prelims'<sup>5</sup> in 10 days' time. He had passed my letter to the Head of the Sixth Year, and I suggested that I deal with him directly to firm up arrangements for that visit and my subsequent week in the school. We agreed that I would send the school copies of the study protocol that had been approved by the University Ethics Committee and also copies of my Criminal Records Bureau enhanced disclosure which provided evidence that I was not prohibited from working with children and young people. The Headteacher said that he would inform the school governing body about the research.

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<sup>5</sup> Public examinations in Scotland are preceded by preliminary examination colloquially terms 'prelims'. For students applying to university these are extremely important as the grades that they attain are provided along with their applications and may result in the offer of either places on either a conditional or unconditional basis.

### *Recruitment of interviewees and the organisation of interviews*

The first round of interviews took place during January 2006. The recruitment of interviewees was conducted through the sixth-year assembly to which I had been invited. Towards the end of the assembly I gave a short presentation about my research to the assembled student group (which numbered about 50 sixth-year students) and distributed copies of the information leaflet that I had prepared (see appendices). The Head of the Sixth Year followed my presentation with a few remarks about the importance that he attached to the project and an exhortation for volunteers to come forward at the end of the assembly. My fieldnotes show that 13 young people responded to this invitation by coming forward and giving their names. Later that day I met with these young people again. It was agreed that I would have free access to the school to meet with them and could make arrangements to conduct interviews during their free periods. I was given permission to use a conference room and a small office as spaces in which to conduct interviews. Both were located along the main corridor leading into the school and adjacent to the sixth-year common room where I was free to spend my time between interviews.

I immediately organised interviews with the 13 young people who had initially expressed an interest in participating in the study. These took place across the rest of the week. In this time, while waiting in the common room, and compiling notes on interviews and more general observations about the sixth form (see below), I was also approached by several other young people who expressed an interest in participating in the research. Given the time constraints under which I was operating, I was unable to offer these young people individual interviews but suggested instead that we might meet as a group or small groups as a means of ensuring that nobody



who wished to participate was excluded from the study. We reached agreement that this was a satisfactory solution and the young people involved arranged themselves into three groups broadly defined by their friendships. Two groups comprised young women. Hazel and Honore came to see me as a pair. Sophie, Chloe and Marnie formed a second group. The third group comprised two young women and two young men, Andrew, Jamie, Shirley and Helen. I fitted these group discussions into the few remaining spaces in my timetable between the individual interviews.

During this first visit to the school I negotiated a period when I could return to the school and re-interview participants in the study. The timing of this visit was again determined primarily by the sixth-form students' examination timetable. I was offered another week in mid-March 2006. This lay between the end of the 'prelims' and the Easter break at which time the students would formally leave school and return only to sit their Higher and Advanced Higher examinations.

The second round of interviews were organised in the same way as the first, by me negotiating directly with the young people involved, identifying when they were free, meeting them in the common room and then going to either the conference room or small office to talk. I made a decision not to re-interview the young people who participated in groups primarily in order to make more time to fit in the second round of individual interviews. Nor had I planned to recruit any more young people to the study but towards the end of the week I was approached by Franco, who explained that he had told the Head of the Sixth Year that he wanted to take part in the study at the time of my first visit to the school but had been unable to attend the briefing which followed the assembly. I explained that I had never received this message but

felt that, under the circumstances and as long as he was aware that I would only be able to offer him one interview, I would certainly not want to deny him participation. Franco thus brought the total of individual interviewees up to 14.

### *The interview sample*

As the previous section indicates, in the course of the school fieldwork, I conducted face-to-face, one-to-one interviews with a total of 14 young people, eight young men and six young women. All of these young people were either 17 or 18 years old. Thirteen of these young people gave me two interviews. One young man, Franco, was interviewed only once, during the second period that I was in the school.

I collected some demographic information about each interviewee in a fairly structured way in the course the interviews (see below under ‘interview structure and questions’). These data showed that eleven of the interviewees identified themselves as white Scottish, two as white English and one as white Eastern-European. The two English interviewees, Angie and Stephen, had been resident in Scotland for around two years, joining the school when they were 16 years old and at the beginning of the post-compulsory phase. The third migrant, Franco, had been resident in Scotland for around five years. All of the interviewees identified themselves as heterosexual.

At the time of the first interview all the interviewees had plans to enter university. Four (Dan, Ross, Scott and Angus) had already secured unconditional offers although each hoped to achieve results in their Highers and Advanced Highers which would enable them attain places on what they regarded as more prestigious courses. The remaining nine interviewees had been offered conditional places at university

subject to their attaining sufficiently high grades in the summative exams which they were due to take in the late spring and early summer.

Twelve of the interviewees had fairly definite ideas about the careers that they wanted to pursue after university. The remaining two interviewees, Angie and Angus, had some ideas about the kinds of occupations that they wanted to enter but were planning to finish their undergraduate studies before making a definite choice. All the interviewees saw themselves entering professions. For example, Shane and Doug were considering teaching, Hayley and Julie the performing arts, Lynsey and Stephen medicine and nursing, Ross, Gareth and Dan business and management. Scott was thinking about becoming an academic, Franco an airline pilot and Stephanie was planning to enter the tourism industry.

By the time of the second interview, when interviewees had had the results of their 'prelims', both Stephanie and Shane had altered their plans. Neither had achieved the grades that they had hoped for and Stephanie had been asked to drop one subject. She still wanted to work in the tourism industry but planned to find employment directly after school. Shane was considering following his father into the railways by taking up an engineering apprenticeship.

A detailed description of interviewees' family circumstances is given in Chapter Eight where I examine in depth the influence of the 'family' on young people's 'serious' relationships. However, in summary, 11 of the young people in the interview sample were living with their biological parents. The other three interviewees were living with a parent and step-parent or a parent and their partner.



Among the three young people living in these reconstituted families, two had what they termed two families – one with each of their biological parents. One interviewee shifted their residence between these families while the other lived with their mother and her boyfriend and saw their father only rarely. Three of the interviewees were only children. Eight of the other interviewees were youngest children and in most cases their older siblings were no longer resident in the family home.

The interviewees' families were broadly middle-class as defined by the occupation of at least one of the adults in the household. By and large the father was the principal wage-earner. For example, Lynsey and Angus's fathers were working in medicine and allied occupations; Stephen, Shane, Dan, Doug, Stephanie, Franco and Gareth's fathers were employed in managerial positions in the public and private sector.

Hayley, Angie and Ross's, fathers were self-employed small-business owners. Seven of the interviewees' mothers had part-time jobs in the retail, education and health sectors. Hayley's mother had given up work to care for Hayley's grandmother who lived with them.

In terms of relationship status and experiences, 12 of the interviewees were in a 'serious' relationship at either the time of the first or second interview. Both Lynsey and Angus had been in relationships which had ended recently. Angus, along with Ross, Gareth, Doug and Angie were unsure about whether they were or had been in love. The seven other interviews were or had been in love.

The following 'pen portraits' summarise the relationship status and experiences of each of the interviewees.

At the time of the interviews **Stephen** had been going out with his girlfriend, who was also 17 years old, for about a year. They met at a pub restaurant where they were both working. She was attending another school close to one where Stephen was studying. Stephen was deeply in love. He had had other relationships but he felt that they were less serious. He and his girlfriend had applied to study at universities in the same town so that they could maintain their relationship. They had decided that if one of them did not gain access to university this year that they would find work and reapply next year. Stephen and his girlfriend had discussed getting married after they had finished university.

**Shane** had been going out with his girlfriend for about six months. She was a student in the year below him at school. He was in love and they had moved in together alternating their residency between their family homes. He was worried about taking up an apprenticeship if it meant moving away and being separated from his girlfriend and family. Shane had had 'serious' relationships before and he loved his last girlfriend. Their relationship ended amicably when his feelings 'faded'.

**Franco** had been going out with his girlfriend for four months. She was an undergraduate student in the first year of a psychology degree at a college in southern England. They had first met in London when he was visiting relatives who lived there. Franco felt that he had fallen in love at first sight and he had been commuting as often as time and money allowed in order to see her. Franco was planning to study either in London or nearby so that they could be together. Franco had had other relationships but this is the most serious.

Ross had been going out with his girlfriend for about a month. She was a student in his year at school. They had met when she was eating out with friends at the pub restaurant where he had been working. One of her friends had introduced them. At the time of our second interview Ross felt close to his girlfriend but was not sure if he was in love. They are both going to be studying at universities in the same city so he was optimistic that they would continue their relationship. Ross had had some short-term relationships before but he felt that this one was more serious. He felt closer to his current girlfriend than any of those with whom he was in a relationship previously.

At the time of our first interview **Gareth** was 'good friends' with a girl in his year at school and thinking about asking her out. He had decided to wait until their exams were out of the way. By the time of our second interview he had asked her out but things had not gone entirely to plan. Although she had agreed, Gareth said that she was reluctant to make a firm commitment until they knew each other a little better. Gareth felt that they were growing closer but not in love yet.

At the time of our first interview **Dan** had been going out with his girlfriend for about two months. She was a student in the same school but two years below him. They had met through their involvement in a school play. By the time of our second interview the relationship had ended. Dan said that he had felt close to his girlfriend but they were never in love. The relationship just 'faded away' but they were still good friends and socialised together.



**Julie** had been going out with her boyfriend for around five months. He was a year older and studying part-time at college in a nearby city and working in a car showroom locally. They had known each other socially before they formed a relationship. Julie was deeply in love. Her boyfriend was planning to move away with her when she left home. Julie had had other relationships but she felt that these were not as serious.

**Scott** had been going out with his girlfriend for just over a year. Their relationship had started when she was still at school but she had now left to pursue work-place training in her chosen profession. Scott said that they had a serious loving relationship. He was not concerned about the effect of moving away to university on their relationship because they were already sometimes separated for weeks at a time when his girlfriend was posted away on training courses.

**Angus** had been in a relationship with a girl which had ended four months before our first interview. This relationship had lasted for about 14 months. He had not had a girlfriend since. She was in the year below him at school and they met through her older brother with whom Angus was friends. Angus was unsure if he had been in love. He sometimes felt like loved her but in the end his feeling faded and they separated amicably.

**Lynsey** had recently ended a year-long relationship with her boyfriend. They had met socially and were part of the same social network. He was two years older than Lynsey when they first met and about to spend a year travelling. He came back early, partly because of the relationship. Lynsey said she was deeply in love. The

relationship had, however, just dwindled away. They went out again 'on and off' but both had had other partners although Lynsey was not seeing anyone at the time of our interviews having decided to wait until she had left school and moved to university before forming another relationship.

At the time of our first interview **Stephanie** was uncertain of her relationship status. She had been in love with a young man whom she thought was being unfaithful to her. By the time of our second interview Stephanie had completely ended this relationship and had just started going out with a young man in her year at school. Stephanie had had a series of unsuccessful relationships in which she felt she had been exploited and hurt.

At the time of our first interview **Angie** had been in a relationship with a young man in her year at school for about two months. They had started going out when they 'bunked off' school together. Angie was not sure if she was in love with him but felt anxious because he had told her he loved her and she had felt compelled to reciprocate. By the time of our second interview Angie was expecting the relationship to come to a 'natural' end when she left school for university. Angie had had a series of unsuccessful relationships with young men. Her most recent boyfriend had been violent towards her.

**Hayley's** boyfriend was 18 years old and had an apprenticeship in the decorating trade. This was Hayley's first 'serious' relationship. It had begun about six months previously when they met through a mutual friend. Hayley was in love and making plans with her boyfriend for him to move with her when she went to university.

**Doug** had been in a relationship with his girlfriend for about four years. She was in the same year at the school. He described their relationship as close, trusting and respectful. At the time of our first interview they had planned to attend universities in the same city and 'keep in touch' but by the time of our second interview Doug's girlfriend had not been offered a place and was planning to take a year off and travel. Doug was supportive but thought that this probably signalled the end of their relationship.

In summary, the young people who granted me individual interviews in the course of this study were middle-class and identified themselves as white and heterosexual. They were academically oriented, studying for 'highers' and 'advanced highers' and expected to go on to higher education. Most were in relationships at the time of the interviews and either were currently in love or had been so at some point in the recent past. They were drawn from a very particular 'slice' of the Scottish population. Comparing this sample to demographic data which relate to the population as a whole suggests that although a similar proportion were living with their biological parents (around two-thirds) only one interviewee was living with a lone parent compared to a quarter of children in Scotland at the time of the most recent census in 2001 (Morrison and Headrick, 2004). In terms of levels of employment and occupation, the sample of interviewees come from families which are typical in terms of the gender differences in the proportions of women and men in full-time and part-time employment. However, a far higher proportion of the male earners in the families of these young people were employed in professions and in



high status positions commanding above average rates of pay (Scottish Executive National Statistics, 2006).

### *The interviews: structure and questions*

Following the conventions of ‘open’ interviewing, I did not have a standardised schedule of questions for either the first or second round of interviews that I conducted with these young people. I did, as Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson suggest, have a list of issues that I wanted to cover but did not seek to cover these in any particular sequence or always either approach or ask about them in the same ways (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 152). I tried instead to create space for interviewees to speak about their lives and their experiences of love and relationships in their own terms. Despite the obvious artificiality of the interview I tried to maintain a conversational tone, be open to being questioned as well as asking questions, and to be encouragingly responsive when interviewees raised issues which seemed to them to be relevant to my enquiry even when it was not initially apparent to me what bearing they had on their experiences of love and relationships (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 152; Walford, 2007). Each of the interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes.

Despite adopting this open format each interview was bracketed by some standard procedural activities. For example, at the beginning of each interview I explained the purpose of the interviews, reprising the information that I had given during the recruitment activity. I also explained the format that the interview would take and clarified the ways in which I would protect interviewees’ confidences within the limits imposed by the ethical conditions attached by the Open University Human

Participants and Material Ethics Committee (described below under ‘ethical considerations’). At the beginning of each interview I also ‘broke the ice’ by asking about how things were going at school and, given that the first and second interviews bracketed the interviewees’ prelims, I asked, in the first interview, what subjects they were studying, how they thought that they would do in the imminent examination and what plans they had for after they left school. In the second interview I asked interviewees how they had done in their ‘prelims’ and what changes, if any, this had led them to make in their plans for the future. This provided a useful means of learning about their academic studies, prospects and concerns, as well as plans for the future. It also opened up a field of enquiry around interviewees’ views about how their plans to leave home would impact on their relationships. This I pursued in the second interview. At the end of each interview I checked with interviewees that they were content with the interview, and particularly if they were concerned about anything and wanted any support or advice. I was not in a position to offer this in person but equipped myself with information about a range of local and national organisations which could provide telephone and/or face-to-face counselling and advice. I also asked interviewees to sign a consent form (see below under ‘ethical considerations’ and the appendices to this thesis) and at the end of our second interview to provide me with some contact information if they wished to be kept informed of the outcomes of the study.

In the first interview, the initial exchanges around school life were followed by a series of generative open-ended questions which were ‘designed as triggers that stimulate[d] the interviewee into talking about a particular broad area’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 152; Flick, 1998). I followed Tom Wengarf’s (2004a: 159-160)

advice for what he terms semi-structured interviews by formulating just a few main questions and having in mind (and on paper) a series of potential prompts and probing questions which might follow from these according to the response of each interviewee. The main questions were; ‘Have you ever been in love and if so would you tell me about it?’, ‘Have you had other relationships, and what were they like?’, ‘What do you think about love and relationships generally?’

Following the first question, I had prepared a series of prompts which sought to elicit more detailed information about the relationship or relationships that the interviewee mentioned. For example ‘Would you tell me about when and how you met’, ‘Please tell me about what kinds of things you do/did together’, and, ‘Tell me about when you realised you were in love’. Following the second question, about other relationships, I was prepared to ask some supplementary questions about the interviewee’s formation of previous relationships, the practices which they involved and their emotional significance. I was prepared to follow my third main question about views on love and relationships in general with prompts and probes around interviewees’ opinions about how they thought their views and experiences were similar to or differed from those others, especially peers and friends. I was also prepared to ask questions about their views about gender differences in attitudes towards and experiences of relationships and love, romantic and other cultural conventions about relationships and love, and how much importance they attached to relationships in their lives.

In practice, most interviews covered all this ground but by quite different routes and with different emphases, reflecting the differing nature of each interviewee’s



experiences. For example, my interview with Angus began by him telling me that he was not sure if he had been love. My subsequent questioning reflected this and I invited Angus to elaborate on his initial comment that, 'there were times when I thought I was in love, but then at other times I wasn't so sure'. Through this we came to talk about the history and context of the relationship in which he had these experiences. This contrasts with my first interview with Gareth in which he responded to my initial question by telling me that he was about to ask a young woman to go out with him but was waiting until they had completed their 'prelims'. In this case the interview progressed via me asking Gareth about his expectations of this relationship then inviting him to reflect on his previous relationship experiences.

It has been argued that this approach, using non-directive questioning and paying close attention through active listening to the responses of interviewees, is important in producing what has been termed 'a maximum of self-revelatory comment' within an interview (Merton and Kendall, 1946). However, it is not the only mode of questioning through which interviews can proceed productively. As Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson note, while this approach might lend interviews some of the features of everyday conversational interaction, the researcher is still always alert to ensuring that they can establish the relevance of the account and some level of adherence to their overarching interests. This involves more directive forms of questioning either in pursuit of clarification, more information or to test developing hypotheses (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 154).

In these interviews, more directive questioning this took a number of forms. I sometimes employed fairly directive questioning in order to seek clarification. A

good example is provided by the following extract from my first interview with Stephen in which, when we were talking about his views about love and relationships in general, the issue of ‘romance’ came up. Stephen had been describing what he saw as romantic moments in his relationship with his girlfriend when he mentioned that he saw himself as an ‘old-romantic’. My response was to ask through a fairly directive question if he could elaborate on this term.

**Stephen:** I think the romantic element of relationships is quite important to me. I mean I see myself as more of an old-romantic than a new-romantic.

**SF:** You’ve been telling me about some of your romantic experiences, is that what you mean by an old-romantic then?

**Stephen:** [Umm] Yeah, I think it’s just, I think I’d like, ‘cos I’m not the sort of person that, I like to treat my women well. I never sort of, I’m always the gentleman as such. I have a lot of true friends who I don’t think treat women well and, well I’ve been brought up that way. Need to treat women well, and stuff like that.

Stephen’s response to my request for clarification clearly opened up a whole new series of issues around his perceptions of his negotiation of gender in the context of ‘serious’ relationships and to his perceptions of the behaviour of his male friends. As a result of this directive question I ‘uncovered’ an account about some of the ways that young men’s behaviour can change in the context of ‘serious’ heterosexual

relationships and how those changes might be configured in relation to the transformative elements of the classical romantic narrative. One consequence of Stephen raising these issues was that I became more alert to the ways that interviewees' accounts of their 'serious' relationships might involve the negotiation of discourses about gender and differences. Similarly, I became aware of the ways in which this negotiate of gender took place against the background of the discursive positions offered up by heterosexuality and its configuration within the culture of friendships and the peer group more widely. In fact, the significance of the issue was such that it is one that I will examine it in more depth in Chapter Six where I explore how 'serious' relationships are sites for (re)negotiation of 'gendered languages of heterosexuality' (Holland et al., 1998: 104).

The potential of more directive questioning either to open up new fields or sharpen the focus of my enquiries is also connected to its utility as a means of testing emerging hypotheses. For instance, in gathering accounts from interviewees of earlier relationships it became apparent that it was common both for them to be seen as 'less serious' and for the transition to the sixth year to be identified as an important moment at which interest and investment in 'more serious' relationships emerged. I subsequently asked several interviewees whether they perceived that their relationship experiences were linked to the negotiation of school by asking if they thought their relationships had changed as they had got older, and why this was. This questioning revealed two things. First, that the pattern of the progression from 'less' to 'more serious' relationships was broadly meaningful and applicable across the sample of interviewees. Second, that the trajectory was not perceived to be a consistent one or that all young people experienced the shift at the same points in



time or identified their transitions through the school as the principal or sole influence on it. These are issues that I go on to examine in Chapter Four and again in Chapter Seven when I explore the variety of ‘triggers’ which interviewees identified as initialising their investment in ‘serious’ relationships. Moreover, this questioning also alerted me to the currency of the concept of the ‘serious’ relationship as an appropriate descriptive term for the relationship experiences of these young people at this time. This gave me the title for this thesis along with access to a concept which was useful in developing my views on and understanding of the range of contextual contingencies to which these young people saw their experiences of love being connected.

Of course, direct questioning requires the negotiation of a fine line between ‘leading’ or coaxing an interviewee to give a preferred or desirable response and eliciting information about where an interviewee positions themselves in relation to an idea or experience and the depth of their identification with it (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 123). One strategy to counter this risk is to try to ‘make the question ‘lead’ in a direction opposite to that in which one expects the answer to lie’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 155). In this study incidences of this kind tended to occur through accident rather than design. Nevertheless, they illustrate how a particular question can sometimes clarify how an interviewee positions her or himself. For example, following the exchange with Stephen reported above, I asked him how he oriented himself in relation to his male friends’ views and behaviour. Stephen seemed to interpret this as an attempt to position him as endorsing it and took the opportunity to reject this inference. He went on to talk about how he still enjoyed joking with his male peers about their relationships with their girlfriends

and, referring to the sexual components of these relationships, like whether ‘they had pumped them yet’ but did that much less often now he was in a ‘serious’ relationship and in love. What I learnt, through an misdirected question, was that interviewees’ positions can be complex and that they move in and out of the various discursive possibilities through which ‘serious’ relationships can be dealt with according to demands and possibilities of different social interactional contexts.

I deployed this learning about interview technique and the substance of young people’s experiences of ‘serious’ relationships in the second round of interviews. Although I referred to the data collected through the first round of interviews to identify the focus of the second, thus mimicking the funnelling and spiralling effect which is common to much qualitative research, I did not narrow the sample by interviewing only some young people again (Flick, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). As I have explained above, I hesitated to make decisions about which interviewees I wanted to speak to again, feeling uncertain about what criteria I might use to make selections about whom to include and exclude and, since the opportunity to see all 13 of the young people who had given me interviews during my first visit to the school was available, I decided to take it.

In the second round of interviews I aimed to cover three main issues: What was happening in young people’s ‘serious’ relationships now; interviewees’ family circumstances; and, to deepen my understanding of specific issues which had arisen in our first interview. In addition, I enquired who they lived with and about their wider family, parental occupations, and family structure and relationships (whether

they lived with their biological parents and if not who they did live with). I also asked them how they identified their ethnicity and sexual orientation. In relation to the first issue, I was particularly interested in what, if anything, had changed in young people's 'serious' relationships. In some cases, for example that of Gareth, there was an obvious starting point in terms of enquiring about whether he had in fact, as planned, asked the girl that he talked about in our first interview to go out with him, and what had happened as a consequence. In other cases, the focus fell on interviewees' revised plans for the continuation or ending of their relationships according to developments related to their achievement in the 'prelims'. This was particularly the case for both Shane and Doug, for example. Shane had done less well in his prelims than he expected and was now thinking not about living locally and hence continuing to live with his girlfriend, but considering moving away to the south of England to take up an apprenticeship. Doug's girlfriend had not achieved entry to the university of her choice and was considering going abroad for a while with the result that he felt that he was facing the end of their relationship. In all cases I was interested in how these experiences and events were shaping interviewees' views, expectations and feelings about their relationships.

In terms of my second field of interest, around interviewees' family circumstances, I was interested in establishing with whom young people lived, the quality of their relationships with members of their family and any ways in which they perceived that their family life had influenced their relationships. This issue had come to light in the context of some of the first interviews where young people had talked about how their relationship had been accommodated or subject to some regulation by their parents. In addition, the influence of parental relationships as patterns of models



for relationships had been signalled by the largest group discussion conducted at the same time as the first round of interviews (detailed below).

In terms of the third issue, I focused on aspects of the biographies of interviewees which had emerged in our first interview and particularly where the connection with their experience of love and ‘serious’ relationships seemed to warrant some elaboration. One example of this arose in my interview with Shane. He had, in our first interview, talked at some length about his interest in football and allegiance to one of the ‘Old Firm’ teams. I had detected that this was in some way relevant to his experience of his two ‘serious’ relationships in which he had been in love but felt I needed to understand this connection more clearly. I therefore came back to this in our second interview. Shane explained that the significance of football went far back into his biography. As a child he had lived for a while in Northern Ireland and had witnessed violence associated with sectarianism. Back in Scotland he had seen sectarianism being played out between rival fans of the ‘Old Firm’. He was opposed to this, having seen its effects at first hand, and actively and publicly pursued a friendship with a supporter of the opposing half of the ‘Old Firm’ as part of ‘taking this stand’. It was in this context that Shane framed some of his beliefs about ‘serious’ relationships. He thought that being open, always speaking one’s mind and being honest about one’s feelings were imperative to a successful relationship. He felt that he had acquired these beliefs and the skills to exercise them through these experiences of witnessing and challenging violence, conflict and difference. In the same way as his friendship with a fan of a rival football team enabled him to step outside sectarianism, he felt seeking and nurturing disclosing intimacy in his

relationships with his girlfriends protected both him and his girlfriends against 'relationship troubles'.

Of course, this is a 'spectacular' example of some of the outcomes of my exploration of the wider biographical resources on which these young people drew to articulate their understanding of their 'serious' relationships and experiences of love. The reason I cite it here is precisely because one of the things that the process of asking interviewees about these connections between their broader biographies and 'serious' relationships exposed was the diversity of these accounts. Not all the interviewees talked about such dramatic events or made connections which spanned such long periods of lives in response to my enquiries. In a sense, this line of questioning became a field in which I became critically aware of my engagement in the process of constantly comparing the data produced through interviews as they were progressing and how this can lead to the generation of more questions than it resolves (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 234; Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 92-99). For example, some interviewees saw their experiences of relationships and love as drawing most heavily on family life in other ways. As I will examine in more depth in Chapter Eight, for Doug it was the death of close relative in his family followed by a death in the family of his girlfriend that he cited as being highly influential on his emotional involvement with his girlfriend. It was through the provision of mutual support that his sense of closeness with his girlfriend had become most emphasised. For Angie her family experiences were also important but no more, and perhaps less so, than her experiences of violence and unfaithfulness in her relationships with previous boyfriends. It was to these experiences that she pointed in order to account for her cautiousness about becoming too emotionally involved in relationships now

and in the future. For others it was not aspects or experiences in the past that figured most prominently in their current relationship experiences but their feelings about the future trajectory of their lives. For Julie, for example, it was the prospect of moving away from home when she went to university that seemed to be shaping her feelings for her boyfriend most strongly. The threat posed to the relationship by this transition had hardened her commitment to him, to maintaining the relationship and the intensity of her love. Finally, it is important to note that the emphasis might change, either within or between the first and second interviews. For Hayley, for example, it was at one point arguments between her parents overheard in her childhood that provided the reference point for her fears of losing her boyfriend. At another point it was, like Julie, the implications of leaving school and moving away from home.

In a sense therefore, what this questioning exposed was the diversity of the ways in which relationships could be seen to connect to young people's biographies both in terms of from where they derived meaning but also to which events they looked to find those meanings. I intend to explore some of the issues which may bear on this variability between and within accounts in the discussion of the methodological implications of the research methods employed in this study which concludes this chapter. However, the specific issue of how relationship are located within and both mobilise and derive their meaning from work on the wider biography of the subject is something that I will return to in the final chapter of this thesis.

### *Group discussions: structure and questions*

A further nine young people contributed to the fieldwork in the school, each participating in one of three small group discussions. One of these groups comprised



two young women and a second, three. The remaining four young people, two young men and two young women, formed the third group. Like the individual interviews these discussions were taped and later transcribed in full to paper. Similarly they also lasted around an hour.

My questioning of the young people involved in these group interviews was organised around the same substantive areas of interest as the individual interviews. However, mindful of the dynamics of group discussion and the ethical issues which might be raised by asking questions which might invite personal disclosure, I focused to a much greater extent on their views about love and relationships in general and abandoned my initial questioning about their individual ambitions beyond school. The discussions began with me making some prefatory comments about the research, establishing that the participants were clear about the scope, purposes and confidentiality with which their contributions would be treated. In this last respect I made it explicit that I recognised that discussions in the context of group could sometimes lead in directions or onto topics that not everyone felt equally at ease with and/or that not everyone would necessarily feel that they had something to contribute on every issue that might come up. I explained that I would facilitate the group and ask some questions but not generally direct these to any person in particular. I also asked the groups if they wanted to make a 'contract' with each other not to discuss each other's contributions with young people outside the group. At the end of the discussions I reprised the points made in individual interviews about my capacity to respond to any concerns (suggesting that participants might not want to raise these now but to seek me out at some point when they could do so discreetly) and asked all the young people involved to give their written consent. They were also invited to

provide contact details if they wanted me to keep them informed about the outcomes of the study.

It is common in qualitative research to acknowledge the various ‘pros and cons’ which are attached to group discussions as a means of data collection (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 144). The potential advantages include providing access to greater numbers of people than might be possible through the conduct of individual interviews and the potential for groups to create a more relaxed and naturalistic form of interaction (Kitzinger, 1994; 1995; Vaughn et al., 1996: 13-20). It has also been argued that the interaction between participants in a group discussion can be a means by which questions and ideas new to the researcher might be generated (Woods, 1979; 1982). However, there are also risks that some participants may be marginalised or feel forced to take up positions in relation to the issues under discussion by the dynamics within the group. The maintenance of status and role may also have what has been called a ‘distorting’ effect as ‘accounts [are] worked up for purposes where truth is probably not the primary motive’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 147). Indeed some scholars have gone so far as to question the capacity of group discussions to give insight into anything other than the dynamics of the group suggesting that both divergence and conformity in views are an ‘emergent property of the group interaction, not a reflection of individual participants’ opinions’ (Sim, 1998: 348). On this last point, as I will argue below, individual interviews are equally an interaction setting (albeit with only two people involved) and there are good reasons for asserting that, while data produced through group discussion are indeed subject to and mediated by the influence of the dynamics of the

interaction between the participants in the group, they are nonetheless capable of communicating information about social realities and experiences.

It is also pertinent to note that conducting group discussions imposes additional and different responsibilities on the interviewer to those arising from conducting individual interviews. These go beyond the responsibility of ensuring that the group is a 'safe' environment in which confidences are not intentionally jeopardised by the researcher through the questions that they ask and the issues that they raise. For example, it is incumbent on the interviewer to moderate the group interaction both to minimise these risks and at the same time ensure that all participants are involved to the degree that they wish to be (Vaughn et al., 1996: 83). In order to achieve these ends, I periodically reminded participants that there was no requirement to speak about their own experiences and that when they expressed a view it would be regarded as but 'one point of view', not a categorical statement with which all other participants or people outside the group might necessarily agree or disagree. In addition, on occasion I also brought discussion on particular issues to a close by summarising the range of points being made and inviting the group to consider if there were any alternative views or positions that they thought might be taken on the issue in hand and, if so, under what circumstances and by whom. On these occasions I sometimes conducted a 'round' to ensure that everyone had had an opportunity to contribute if they so wished.

Finally, it is necessary to say something about the role played by the focus group discussions in the wider research process and specifically how they supplemented the data produced through individual interviews. The main benefit of the group



discussions was as a site for testing emergent ideas and opening what has been termed the ‘dialectical interaction between data collection and data analysis’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 205). Although it was not possible systematically to check every emerging theme or idea (partly because the group discussions took place between interviews rather than after they had all been completed), they were a vehicle for the testing and development of analytical concepts which I was generating. For example, interviews with Hayley and Julie in particular had alerted me to the possibility that perceptions of parental influence on young people’s ‘serious’ relationships, and especially a sense that they were a potential source of concern, were, in important ways, associated with gender. As I will demonstrate in Chapter Eight, I was able to explore this issue particularly fruitfully with Hazel and Honore in the context of our group discussion.

### *Sampling issues*

I have already described the processes by which I came to select the settings in which this research was conducted and, in relation to school, the processes by which interviewees were recruited. I have also described these young people in terms of their socio-economic and family backgrounds, ethnicity and sexual orientation. I intend to focus in this section on the issues raised by basing this study on accounts gathered from a small and self-selecting group of young people.

It is conventional in qualitative research for data to relate to relatively small numbers of self-selecting participants. This is appropriate when the purpose is what has been termed idiographic rather than nomothetic; that is to explore in depth people’s subjective experiences and the concrete, local settings in which social meanings,

practices and interactions occur (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Plummer, 1983). Given that my concern was to examine young people's experiences and the meaning that attached to them and, moreover, that I had no intention of establishing empirical regularities, testing the predictive capacity of hypotheses or attempting to make any generalisations on the basis of this research adopting this convention is entirely appropriate. However, this is not to say that the data reported here have no potential relevance or meaning beyond providing an account of a few personal experiences, since, as Wendy Hollway (1989: 15) has argued, personal accounts always reflect social and cultural experience and as such, although the specificities cannot be ignored, they 'speak' of the wider social domain and may be indicative of instances of experiences among others in similar circumstances. However, even if the argument that the size of sample is not inherently problematic is accepted, there is still the issue of the extent to which it is said that data provided a sufficiently 'high theoretical yield' to be adequate to the purposes to which I am putting them in particular the claim that they can sustain interpretation as a means of exploring young people's experiences of 'serious' relationships (Connell, 1995: 90).

In a classical formulation it has been argued that a sample in a qualitative study is adequate when theoretical saturation is reached (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 61). That is the point at which the data have fully elaborated the theoretical interpretation placed upon them. However, as I will describe below, my analysis was not purely 'grounded' but inflected by theory and therefore the degree of saturation might not be determined purely on the basis of the data themselves but in relation to established theoretical positions. Nonetheless, as Peter Redman has pointed out, 'the general principle holds good – qualitative sampling needs to be theoretically rich. It needs to

illustrate, qualify, challenge or generate theoretical insights and bear the weight of the theoretical interpretation placed upon it' (Redman, 1999: 123).

Following Redman, I would argue that the sample of young interviewees involved in this study is adequate to the demands which I placed on the data to theorise the relationships between social context and young people's experiences of love in the context of 'serious' emotional relationships. For example, as reported above, the sample included young people currently in relationships and not in relationships; young people who were in love, had been in love and others who were unsure or ambivalent about their feelings. Their relationships were of differing durations and, as I have shown, at least two of the interviewees formed relationships between the first and second rounds of interviews. In addition, some had had more than one experience of being in love and some characterised their relationship experiences as generally satisfactory while others had experienced what they perceived to be both satisfactory and poor or damaging relationships.

However, despite this diversity, these are still, nonetheless, accounts derived from a particular group of young people in a particular setting and all at a particular point in their lives. Consequently, as I will argue in the final chapter of this thesis, despite the richness of these data and their adequacy to bear the interpretation that I place upon them, there is a great deal of scope to extend research of this kind to other groups in other contexts.



### *Fieldnotes and observational research in the school*

It is traditional in qualitative research to compile detailed fieldnotes which comprise a relatively concrete description of social processes and the contexts in which they occur (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 175-186). As I argued at the beginning of this chapter making an observational record of this kind is considered an important component in the sociological study of micro-social interaction which focuses on understanding emotional experiences. In addition to compiling records of observations that I made in both youth club and school (particularly in the sixth-year common room) I also compiled detailed fieldnotes on interviews and group discussions.

Given their particular relevance to both the development of thinking about the data generated through interviews and the centrality of these data in the analysis which follows in subsequent chapters of this thesis, I will focus my attention here on the processes and issues surrounding the recording of observations made in the school. However, in terms of the processes involved in recording my observations my comments are relevant to both settings. The aim of the observational work in school was to collect data about the little cultural world of the sixth-year common room and particularly social interaction between young people and practices associated with their 'serious' relationships. These observations were made in a fairly *ad hoc* fashion; they were not organised systematically to either a schedule or timetable but took place at times when I was free from interviews. I also recorded some of my interactions with teachers which were germane to forming an understanding of their views about young people's relationships and my role. These assumed particular relevance when I came to consider both the extent to which the interviewees were

representative of the wider peer group (as illustrated above) and also the range of possible influences bearing on young people's engagement with and response to the research and kinds of data produced through the interviews.

As is typical of making observational records, I began the process with a fairly wide focus and recorded general impressions of the setting and activities within it (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 180). However, informed by the content of the interviews and group discussions, I began to focus on the ways that the sixth-year common room might be functioning as a site for the enactment of 'serious' relationships. The two following extracts from fieldnotes exemplify this process. The first comes from the morning of my first day in the school when I was simply trying to describe the common room.

(17<sup>th</sup> January 2005)

The common room is like an extension of a stereotypical teenage bedroom. There is a battered stereo playing in the corner, second-hand, bursting sofas grouped into four rough squares in each of the corners of the room and everywhere litter and junk – textbooks, folders, empty plastic cups, crisp packets, papers, magazines, coats, jumpers, shoes and bags. People are just lying about and chatting but sometimes there are little bursts of activity – a ball thrown about and a birthday party with a cake and candles being prepared.

The following extract which comes from the second period of time I spent in the school. These notes were made in the early afternoon.

(15th March 2005)

Scattered around the busted sofas are groups of students in varying versions of school uniform, eating, talking and some 'snogging'. In the background the stereo starts to play The Beatles' 'All you need is love'. I observe that there are three groups occupying the room, two large mixed-sex groups, in which some of the kissing is going on, a small group of intense, quiet, bristly looking boys. I wonder if these are the academic group because one is looking at a physics worksheet, There is also a group of girls. I can feel myself starting to map the typology of cliques that some of the interviewees have referred to.

It is important to acknowledge that fieldnotes are neither exhaustive nor comprehensive records of observations. There is a 'trade-off' to be made between providing 'deep' descriptions and retaining a focus on being concrete (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 184). In this context I do not want to down-play these considerations or the extent to which my observational activities and began to be more selective as the focus on research interests became clearer and thereby began to exclude other interesting and potentially relevant data. Moreover, my observational activities were limited to one specific area within the school. As a consequence, they do not provide a full account of how these social groupings within the sixth year and the enactment of some of the practices associated with 'serious' relationships might be subject to reconfiguration in other settings within the school. Treating them within these limitations I regard them as subsidiary and supplementary to the focal data collection activities undertaken through interviews and group discussions.



I also recorded via fieldnotes my impressions of interviews and group discussions immediately after I had completed them. I adopted a more systematic procedure in this endeavour. Following the work of Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2000:70), and Stephen Frosh et al., (2002:17) I developed a *pro forma* on which I recorded not only information about when and where the research intervention took place, some basic demographic information about the participant(s) and the main features of their contribution in terms of their relationship status and experiences but also my feelings about the intervention and my impression of how the participant(s) had experienced it. I noted whether I felt uncomfortable, if so at what points, whether the same had been the case for the participant(s) and moments when I felt surprised or found things difficult (either to understand or in terms of engaging participant(s) in the research). This tracking of my emotional responses to the process reflected a concern to provide myself with means to begin to understand the dialogic processes which might be involved in the production of the data.

### **Coding and analysis of data**

As I have indicated earlier in this chapter, as is common in qualitative research, I made a preliminary analysis of the data produced by both the individual interviews and, to a lesser extent, the group discussions during the periods in which I conducted the fieldwork. This process enabled me to focus my questioning during these subsequent data collection activities and also to begin to clarify emergent analytical questions, categories and concepts (Flick, 1998: 178; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 205-206; Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 42).

Having completed the data collection in March 2005, I transcribed all the interviews and group discussions from tape to paper including, at this point, a conventional range of paralinguistic annotations indicating pauses and significant changes in interviewees' tone or volume emphasis. I also noted into the transcriptions incidences of laughter and overlapping talk (Silverman, 1993: 303; Wengraf, 2004a: 217). These paralinguistic annotations are included in the citations from interviews reported in this thesis and a guide to their meaning can be found in the appendices. I effectively conducted another 'pass' over these data through this process of transcription and as I did so compiled summaries of the major themes and issues emerging in each interview. I also drew into this process the fieldnotes which I compiled during my time in school. These, as I have described, fell into two broad categories, those that related specifically to my initial impressions of each interview and others that related to observations that I made of the social interaction of young people in the sixth-year common room. The notes about my impressions of the interviews were instrumental both in terms of providing a means of enriching my memories of the interviews and also alerting me to potential analytical concerns. Those aspects which related to my impressions of quality of the interaction were useful in enabling me to begin to think about some of the ways that the accounts which I generated were being mediated by the interview process itself. The observational data had a triangulatory function, that is they provided a means of composing a 'thicker' account of some aspects of the social context (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 231). For example, I was able, while I read Lynsey's description of the broad social groups within the sixth year, to compare this with my observations and begin to understand where she and other interviewees located themselves in terms of the wider culture of these friendship groups. This was useful



in prompting me to think both about to what extent the interviewees represented particular social groups within the sixth form and some of the ways that interviewees' perceptions of the relative status of these groups might be inflecting their accounts. It is important to note that, following Hammersley and Atkinson, I did not bring these data into dialogue seeking to determine the validity of either of the two sources, but rather to assess the validity of the inferences which I was drawing from them (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 232).

I continued over a period of several months to make a series of further passes over the data, applying codes which I developed to identify themes and issues and generating more as I progressed. I used a computer-based qualitative analysis tool (Atlas ti.) to support this process, marking the transcripts with codes and notes to expedite extraction and compilation at a later date. I followed conventional practice in qualitative analysis initially working with a great many fairly loose 'sensitising' concepts which I slowly disaggregated and linked in a variety of ways as I developed hypotheses about the data (Blumer, 1954: 7). For example, I began work with a broad category for organising the data which I entitled 'love is'. This initially referred to all references within the data to experiences of love. I subsequently broke this down into a variety of more refined codes which clustered around the distinction between accounts of feelings of love as an abstraction and accounts of the social practices through which love was enacted. As I progressed I focused more and more on my particular interests in the apparent contingency of interviewees' emotional experiences on a variety of biographical and social influences. Throughout this process I also employed a version of the constant comparative method through which I made assessments of how particular categories within the data were similar and



being differentiated between interviewees and in relation to related codes and conceptual categories (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995 :213).

These processes play an important role in the analysis which I present in subsequent chapters of this thesis. However, my approach was not simply grounded in the data but also inflected by theoretical concerns (Barbour, 2001; Pope et al., 2000). Clearly, these emanated from my original research questions which were established prior to data collection and also my reading of the academic literature. I tried to bring these into dialogue in my analysis so that I neither simply imposed existing theory on the data nor assumed that they could be taken at face value. In practice I was alert to concepts as they emerged from the data but also constantly checked these against my theoretical presuppositions. As Peter Redman has noted, this process involves rejecting both the ideas that theory ‘speaks’ data and that analysis can only proceed on the basis of the theory which is inherent or implicit in the data (Redman, 1999: 133). Following Redman (1999: 144), who in turn refers to Bev Skeggs (1995: 201) I would argue that the analytical viewpoints of both the researcher and the participant in research are partial and that plausible interpretations of data are possible which do not derive directly from the knowledge of either.

### **Ethical considerations**

Undertaking research into young people’s experiences or love and relationships raises some serious ethical issues. Alongside the importance of ensuring that their confidences are protected there is also the possibility that delving into issues which are usually private and personal may elicit disclosures of harm or abuse or serious emotional concerns or difficulties. In order to ensure that young people’s confidences

were protected and any such disclosures appropriately handled this study was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements for research involving human participants laid out by the Open University Human Participants and Materials Ethics Committee. A protocol detailing the scope, purposes and methods involved in the research, and the steps which would be taken to protect the confidentiality of participants including the management and reporting of data, was submitted to this committee at the beginning of 2005 and approval granted for the fieldwork at the beginning of April of that year. This protocol referred to the fieldwork which was undertaken in the youth club. An additional submission was made to the committee to cover the fieldwork undertaken in the school. This was approved at the end of 2005.

Under the conditions of these protocols, which incorporate the statutory demands placed on all researchers by the Data Protection Act (1998), I agreed to remove or change all information in the data, including the names of people and places, which might enable participating persons or organisations to be identified. Consequently, all the names used in this thesis are pseudonyms. I have also taken care not to specify through description the locations in which the research took place, a step which is especially important in maintaining participants' confidentiality since the study took place in a country where communities tend to be relatively small. Throughout the study all data have been stored securely and a guarantee given to the Open University authorities that they will be destroyed when the study is complete.

The participation of young people in the study was conditional on their informed consent. As I have described above, verbal consent was obtained prior to each

interview and group discussion and at the end of each intervention young people were asked to sign a consent form. During this process I made it clear that I would be obliged to address any disclosures of harm or abuse by informing the relevant authorities, however, I emphasised that I would not do this without informing the young person involved. I also explained that I was not able to offer advice or support in person to any young person involved in the study but that I was equipped with and happy to provide information about local and national organisations from which advice on relationships and other matters could be obtained. Participants in the study also retained the right to withdraw information relating to them from this study. Not only were participants offered the opportunity to exercise this right immediately after their participation in individual or group interviews but I also wrote to each them during 2006 to appraise of progress with the research and none made a request at this time although reminded of their right to do so. Copies of the consent form, along with the information leaflet, which included my contact details and those of my supervisors as well as information about the study and the safeguards put in place to protect participants, are appended to this thesis.

As mentioned above, I referred to all these safeguards at the beginning of each interview and group discussion, and provided participants with an opportunity to seek clarification on any matter relating to the ethical conduct of the study. I also took steps to ensure that someone in authority was always aware of my whereabouts in both the youth club and school and, in the case of the school, provided a written record of the interview timetable and made it known in which room the interview was taking place.



Observational records and other fieldnotes were available to participants in the research on request, subject to the condition that they could only inspect those parts which referred to them.

I made myself subject to an enhanced disclosure check by the National Criminal Records Bureau before beginning the research fieldwork in order to be able reassure participants, and particularly those adults with managerial responsibilities in the youth club and school, that I was not disbarred from working with children and young people.

### **The ontological status of the data**

My main aim in this section of this chapter is to examine the ontological status of the interview data paying particular attention to the inevitable questions that arise about whether recording talk about emotional practices and experiences is capable of shedding light on the social realities of lived experience.

In Chapters One and Two I argued that the sociological study of emotions in general and love in particular has revealed that emotions and emotional experiences are framed by reifying discourses and are conventionally articulated through particular narrative forms. I demonstrated that, in contemporary western cultures, experiences of love are linked to the specific possibilities which have come into existence as the narrative of the classical romance vies with the emergent realist account which is associated with the increasing democratisation of love. I also argued that the narratives of love have become important in the ongoing project of forming and

maintaining a sense of identity (Giddens, 1992; 1999; Jamieson, 1998; Stacey and Pearce, 1995).

The accounts of their experiences of love and ‘serious’ relationships that young people gave to me through the interviews seemed to draw on these narrative repertoires and through them mobilised specific possibilities for the negotiation and understanding of their experiences and as part of their subjectivity. For example, prefacing an account of a previous relationship Angie said:

Angie:           It’s a long story. You could say, girl meets boy and falls in love I suppose, but it’s more complicated than that. You know if you read about it in a magazine it’d be like a problem page letter. ‘How do I know if he’s in love with me?’

Angie’s explicit indexing of the cultural resources of both the romantic narrative and ‘problem page’ is a powerful illustration of the ways that some young people chose to ‘give voice’ to and orient their experiences in relation to the widely available cultural narratives of love and relationships. Through it she signalled her awareness of these conventions and their utility as shorthand ways to catalogue and to define her emotional experience. However, in doing so she also implied that she recognised that they were simplifications and that she was going to elaborate on them in relation to the specificities of her own experience, as indeed she went on to do. As this suggests, young people may employ discursive resources both to handle and to narrate their experiences but this does not mean that they perceive them to be constituted only or entirely through them. They are means to communicate their

experiences and, while it is essential to be aware of the ways that they may mediate these, we should not assume that experience is simply reducible to the possibilities provided by discursive resources and pre-existing narratives which are made available in specific social settings.

I would accept claims that conventions about talking about relationship and love saturated the interview process, and that those conventions were serving both wider purposes in terms of the interviewees' negotiation of their identity as well as the immediate demands relating to the negotiation of the interactional context of the interview. However, I reject claims that the employment of these conventions render these young people's accounts nothing more than the rehearsal of pre-existing discourses or deny us access to any social reality.

In order to progress this argument I want to locate it in relation to the academic debate about ontological status of qualitative data. There have been a number of powerful critiques of the ability of qualitative interview data to offer accounts of social reality (Dingwall, 1997; Stanley and Morgan, 1993). In fact the 'constructedness' and textuality of these data has become a serious concern for many qualitative researchers. It has been suggested that there are at least five layers of 'constructedness' to contend with in qualitative research. The first two relate to the production of the data during its collection and involve the use of narrative and rhetoric conventions in interviewees' accounts to construct meanings and subjective positions and the ways that these are oriented towards the particular audiences (including specifically the self and the interviewer). The third and fourth layers relate to data analysis. In analysis these accounts are interpreted in particular ways and



through writing up, reworked. This also involves the employment of rhetorical and narrative conventions and an orientation towards a particular audience (usually the researcher writing for an imagined reader). Finally, a fifth level, this account is yet again subject to (re)construction as it is consumed by the reader (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 26-27). As Peter Redman (1999) forcefully argues, as a result it can seem as if:

My interpretation of the...material and your [the reader's] appropriations of it are thus textual constructions of textual constructions, several times removed from the life as it was lived, a life that anyway never existed in an original state of pure sensory perception, unsullied by cultural meaning. Thus it is now commonplace to assert, qualitative data do not reflect reality in any simple sense but are profoundly fictional, palimpsests of cultural readings and re-writing.

(Redman, 1999: 135)

However, as I have argued with reference to examples drawn from the interview data generated through this study, while it is essential to accept that qualitative data are not transparent accounts of social experiences and realities, they are connected to these realities and the subjective experience thereof. For example, as studies of health and illness have vividly illustrated, however clinicians and patients may construct their understanding of their conditions and needs through, respectively, their professional practices and accounts of treatment and care, these conditions are real, in that they exist outside the bounds of any data collection process (Charmaz, 1983; Dodier and Camus, 2002). Like Willis and Trondman (2000), these scholars

are arguing that experience cannot be understood without reference to the mediating ideas and culture within which it is situated but that through ‘the ethnographic recording of lived experience within the social’, knowledge can be obtained about social reality (Willis, and Trondman 2000: 10). In fact, it is possible to go further than this and to argue that qualitative data collected through interviews can represent particularly effective ways of getting at these social realities. As my experiences of conducting research in the youth club demonstrate, it is important to be alert to the fact that the quantity of information that can be gleaned about the enactment and emotional experience of ‘serious’ relationships from observations may be quite limited in some circumstances and contexts. Many relationship practices, and the experience of feelings associated with them, take place in private or in other social spheres to which it is impossible to achieve access. It is only through inviting people to give accounts of these that any sense of what they involve can be assembled.

### **Data collection: Perceptions of the research, the researcher and reactivity in the interviews**

As the preceding discussion about the ontological status of data implies, it is now widely accepted within the practice of qualitative research that data which are produced through fieldwork are, at least in part, mediated through the interactions which take place between the researcher and their informants. In the case of interviews, these are not arenas in which participants give straightforward descriptions of their personal experiences and social realities. They are contexts in which interviewees are creating and recreating narratives of these experiences in the light of the resources which the research intervention makes available for organising and representing the self. Focal points of attention within the field have become the

ways that power relations between the interviewer and interviewee configure this relationship along with research participants' perceptions of what kind of audience the researcher represents (Epstein and Johnson, 1998: 105; Frosh et al., 2002: 32-49; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 18; Labov, 1972; Russell, 2005 ). It is therefore incumbent on researchers to consider what forms these influences take and how they may be affecting their research. As Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson observe, research activity always takes place in the context of researchers' personal characteristics, values, interests and sympathies and, because it 'involves participation in the social world', it demands that they, 'reflect...on the products of that participation' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 17). Furthermore, they assert that this is not inherently a weakness but rather a potential asset in the analytical process. As they put it:

The fact that as researchers we are likely to have an effect on the people we study does not mean that the validity of our findings is restricted to the data elicitation situations on which we relied. We can minimize reactivity and/or monitor it. But we can also exploit it: how people respond to the presence of the researcher may be as informative as how they react in other situations.

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 18)

Following these exhortations it is my intention here to examine first, the role which I occupied in the principal research setting represented by the school and, second, in the light of this role, to explore specific areas of reactivity within the individual interviews that I conducted in that setting. It is in relation to issues about my role that



I will make some suggestions about why the fieldwork in the youth club and school took on such different trajectories.

As I detailed in earlier sections of this chapter, I had problems in establishing and maintaining my role as a researcher in the youth club. This no doubt contributed to the very low profile of the study with both the young people and adults in that setting. I found it hard to create an identity other than that of being another volunteer youth worker and to break through the restrictions that I felt that this imposed on the kinds of engagement that I could achieve with young people. Of course, I do not want to suggest that it was simply because I could not be solely a 'researcher' that my capacity to elicit much data from young people about their views and experiences of love and relationships was so limited. Arguably, having such a low profile as a researcher might have had benefits. It might have made it easier for young people to engage with me if, for example, they had wanted to talk discreetly. In addition, it was not my role which militated against eliciting interviews but, as I have suggested the fact that the youth club was also not a setting where young people either seemed to enact or to talk about 'serious' relationships to any great extent. However, neither of these observations detracts from the overarching point I am making. Namely, that the way that my role as a 'researcher' was perceived and what that implied about how I might act and how young people interact with me was configured within the possibilities made available by this particular setting in ways that contributed to some of the difficulties that I experienced with progressing the research as it was planned.

The extent to which this was related to my role only really became clear when I contrasted it with my experiences of the 'role' which it was possible to negotiate in the school. There are multiple possible positions which the researcher operating in a school may adopt. Moreover, the researcher's role may shift between and even within specific interactional contexts that occur within the institution. As, for example, Lisa Russell (2005) has recently illustrated, it is possible, while observing classroom interaction, to be recruited almost simultaneously by young people as an ally in their resistance to schooling and by teachers as a classroom assistant helping to control that resistance. Within my own experience I have also seen how the researcher can become a confidante for the expression of a boy's otherwise carefully concealed anxieties about powerlessness within his male peer group, or equally, the vehicle for the maintenance or boosting of a boy's power through becoming a target for the expression of displaced frustration and anger at having been undermined by a teacher (Prendergast and Forrest, 1998: 155-156). What both these examples illustrate is that the researcher entering the school enters an environment potentially rich with possibilities for the roles that they might assume. Furthermore, whether or not they are so directly caught up in the kinds of relationships and power struggles described above, the setting is saturated with activities around the negotiation of status, power and authority between adults, between adults and young people, and between young people as individuals and in groups. Researchers may not be caught up in these activities as directly as Russell or Prendergast and Forrest but these represent the background against which they establish a role. The role assigned to me in the school involved in this study did indeed largely exclude me from direct engagement with these dynamics around resistance status and power between young people and teachers. No doubt, the fact that I intervened with older young people,



who in their own words saw their relationships with teachers as ‘more like adults than teachers and pupils’ contributed to this as did the fact that I was on site for only a relatively period of short time and spent the bulk of this engaged in interviews rather than interacting with and observing wider school culture.

The major factor in the establishment of the specific role that I occupied seems to have been the extent to which the research was endorsed by senior staff within the school and young people’s involvement in it was supported and encouraged by them. From the outset, when the Year Head introduced me to the sixth year, he made my position, interests, role and the scope of activities that this would involve, very clear. In addition, he assigned both me and the study a high status. In his introduction to the sixth year he presented the research as an opportunity to ‘help me further my career’ and also as a chance for students to contribute to ‘an important piece of research’ and to further their understanding of activities of ‘researchers and universities’. He also said that he ‘fully expect[ed] people to come forward and volunteer to be interviewed’. This clarity about my role and the research, the forging of connections between participation in the study and these young people’s investments in their educational careers and ambitions for entering higher education (especially timely given that they were sitting ‘prelims’ and that the vast majority were planning to go to university) was in stark contrast to the experiences of Lisa Russell, described above. Unlike, for example, Valerie Hey who found herself, when studying young working-class women’s experiences of schooling marginalised and simultaneously regarded as ‘non-serious but also a threat’ (Hey, 1997: 39), I found myself positioned as a high status visitor engaged in a valued and important activity.



However, while such a powerful endorsement had its benefits, most evident in terms of the ease with which I recruited interviewees, it is also important to consider the possibility that it may have had some potential drawbacks. For example, although I never intended to conceal my role, these actions made it extremely public and also in consequence, made the act of volunteering to participate in the research a public one. This may have militated against engagement in the research by young people who felt less confident about coming forward. In addition, the connections that The Head of the Sixth Year made between the study and the academic world may have deterred some potential volunteers who saw it not as interesting but stuffy or boring and perhaps even threatening. While evaluating the extent to which these possible outcomes occurred is extremely difficult, it is clear that the particular way in which the study and I, as the researcher, were presented, was meaningful to those young people who chose to participate. Like Scott, several other young people said in interview that they had contributed because ‘it was useful to do’ and ‘interesting’, and, as he added, ‘I think it’s important that people take part in research so we know what they think’.

I do not want to suggest that high profile and status within the school setting meant that there were no tensions around my role. I was given considerable freedoms – to come and go as I wanted and to arrange interviews at my and young people’s convenience – but at the same I recognised that in important ways my research was monitored and the conditionality of my presence made explicit. Occasional comments made by the Head of the Sixth Year about the expectation that young people ‘might need to be revising for their ‘prelims’ instead of talking to me, that he hoped ‘I was finding the interviewees’ contributions useful’, and them to be ‘a good

bunch of kids' seemed to imply both that I needed to remain aware that my research was subsidiary and subordinate to school studies and that he was keen to check that the participants were reflecting the institution in a good light.

Notwithstanding these considerations, the point I want to emphasise here is that, when compared to the youth club, the school represented a setting where there were opportunities to occupy a distinctive role as 'a researcher' which was meaningful to young people. I was forcefully sponsored by a powerful and high-status 'gate-keeper' in the person of the Head of the Sixth Year. In addition, as I will show in Chapters Four and Eight, the high status that was attached by young people in the school to being interested and involved in relationships characterised by 'serious' emotional investment made the recruitment process relatively easy and provided young people with some degree of personal motivation to participate in the research.

This then provides the context for considering the issue of the influences of reactivity on the interview data. There is clear evidence that I did represent a particular 'audience' for interviewees in relation to whom their accounts were configured. In an interview with Stephanie, for example, she began an account of family relationships and circumstances by saying, 'Erm I come from, I don't know if this is the right term, but a broken home'. This suggests that she saw me as someone who might have expertise about relationships and wanted to ensure that her account fitted appropriately with the terms of reference that such a person might use. Similarly, Doug, describing his network of close friends, said, 'I guess you'd call me one of the lads, I like the banter', suggesting perhaps a degree of defensiveness about some of the boisterous behaviour he went on to describe, and also perhaps inviting me to



identify with or distance myself from a particular form of masculinity with which he was associating himself.

These two examples highlight the two main themes around which I will organise this discussion. First, the ways that my perceived 'expertise' and knowledge around issues connected with love and relationships influenced the accounts which young people gave through interviews and, second, how they actively negotiated and sought to manage aspects of their identities in relation to their perceptions of the similarities or differences in our gender and sexualities. In the context of examining these dimensions of the interaction along which reactivity was configured, I will also comment on the effects that my age seemed to be having. I do not want to suggest that my ethnicity was not also important but evidence about the ways that this might have been so is less discernable in the interview data.

As I have suggested, from the moment of my introduction to the sixth year, the Head of the Sixth Year had positioned me both as a form of student (studying for a PhD) and as a form of expert (engaged in important research and able to impart some privileged knowledge about the activities of academics to any young person who participated). As Scott's comments cited above, and those of other young people who explicitly referred to 'helping me with my research' suggest, the 'student' aspect was important in the ways that interviewees established my identity. However, in the matter of few days of interviewing this had been joined, and perhaps superseded, by my identification with the role of an expert. As Gareth explained at the end of our first interview when I asked him how he found the process, 'It's quite good actually. People are saying it's good but won't always tell you what to expect. They just say,



Going to see Dr Love then?'. Once it became known that I knew about this epithet it became something of a running joke among the sixth year. Sometimes my entry to the common room would be greeted by someone growling, in a low, American accent, 'How you doing Dr Love?'. This seems to me to be a particularly interesting example of how 'common knowledge' within the sixth year was generated about my role and how it was handled. In addition, it is indicative of how interviewees positioned themselves and me in the interview process and how they negotiated their participation in the research in relation to their wider network of friends and peers.

In relation to the interviewer–interviewee relationship and the effect that this may have had on the data produced through this interaction, there was clear evidence that the overtones of this positioning (me as 'doctor', them as, presumably, a 'patient') facilitated for some young people extremely profound levels of disclosure and reflection on their emotional experiences. As I had with Gareth, I asked Hayley at the end of our interview how she had found it. She said:

Hayley:           It was good. Yeah (.) good. I suppose I've never really talked about my relationship like this with anyone. I mean not so deeply. I really enjoyed talking about my feelings. It makes them clearer, you know. When you think about it, you have an opportunity to think about it with someone different, you kind of understand them better. It's been really good.

Not only was Hayley indexing our interaction in the interview with commonsense understandings of what we might broadly term 'therapeutic' or 'counselling'

interactions but also alerting me to something important about an aspect of her relationship with her boyfriend. Hayley had, throughout the interview, been referring to the significance of the reciprocal disclosures that took place in the context of this relationship. For her, they both symbolised and amplified her love for her boyfriend. Through the maintenance of constant communication about their feelings and experiences they had grown closer and fallen deeper in love. However, here she was suggesting that the disclosures that she was making to me involved talking about herself more intimately than she had done in any other context. I do not mean to question to whom she was more confiding, or the legitimacy of her feelings for her boyfriend, but what this suggests to me is that being in love is not simply an emotional state which exists in the context of practices engaged in with the object of that love. Rather some of the subjective aspects of the emotional experience can be carried within the individual and only be examined in contexts other than in the context of a direct relationship with the object of that love. Of course, I am not suggesting that the interview generated Hayley's feelings, rather that through understanding the interview in broadly 'therapeutic' terms, Hayley could use it as a context in which to give voice to feelings which remained difficult to express in other contexts.

The other interesting idea to which Hayley's construction of the interview process alerted me was the ways that asking questions about relationships might be configured against the wider cultural conventions associated with the public and private aspects of emotional relationships. Our culture is saturated with public discussion about relationships particularly through the vehicle of the mass media (Brown, 2002; Westman et al., 2003). Whilst it is clear that many people retain a

degree of scepticism about the reality of these representations, they no doubt contribute to the idea that relationships are in some respects public property and, moreover, that issues and difficulties within them can be understood and resolved by drawing on the knowledge of experts.

However, while my positioning as ‘Dr Love’ and the construction of the interview as a form of ‘relationship therapy’ seemed to be giving permission to some young people to speak, for others it seemed to represent a threat. This was most apparent in my interactions with Doug. He seemed at many times during our interviews to be ambivalent about talking to me about his feelings. He would sometimes talk easily about his relationship with his girlfriend but at other times seemed to find it difficult or be reluctant to articulate what he felt about her. At some points in the interviews, in response to this, I found myself ‘back-peddling’ or skirting round the issue and coming back to it via aspects of his account which seemed to be less difficult for him to negotiate. It was in this context, as we spoke about how his relationship with his girlfriend had been affected by his experiences of his mother’s death some two years before, that he told me about his experiences of seeing a child psychologist. While not wanting to over-interpret this account, it does seem to me to be suggesting that he might have been drawing some equivalence between the interview and that encounter. As the following comments about ‘putting up a barrier’ indicate, the suggestion that he was compelled to attend these sessions and that perhaps that they made him feel treated like a child suggest that he may have felt there were limits to his willingness to disclose his feelings to me. He explained that after the death of close relative:



Doug: I can remember we spoke to the doctor and the doctor said erm 'OK, there's a number if you want to talk to a child, or a psychologist' and it was something that my dad just said, 'Right (.) you know, (.) it's such a big thing to happen to such a young person, so you know, I, I (..) just for your er sake, really, I would recommend it', so I went along to a couple. I can't remember. It was just along the road from me actually, but (.) I didn't really (.) enjoy it. It seemed (..) seemed almost like forced for me and it seemed that I, I, I had to talk about something that (..) I'm a bit, a bit, you know (.) you know (...) you know, I put up a barrier sometimes, and that's something with [my girlfriend], I can just (.) er forget about that and talk to her.

Moreover, as Doug's concluding comments suggest, Hayley's observations about the interview as a place where she could disclose and work through feelings which she had, not in the context of her relationship with her boyfriend, are not universal. What Doug seemed to be suggesting was that his encounters with 'experts' did not necessarily provide complementary contexts for thinking about his emotions but instead amplified his emotional investment in his girlfriend as a confidante.

While not wanting to suggest that my positioning as a relationship 'expert' was connected with gender in any simple way, what both Hayley's and Doug's experiences of aspects of the interview do alert us to is how gender difference and similarity may have been cross-cutting this construction of the interview as a

potentially 'therapeutic' encounter in which young people could disclose and explore their feelings. For example, as a result of my experience with Doug I went back through the interview data trying to explore whether young people's feelings about openness and responsiveness to my questioning was in some way patterned by gender. The picture that emerged was complex. There were indeed other young men who as Gareth put it, 'found it quite difficult to talk about his feelings' and no equivalent instances among the young female interviewees. However, the data themselves did not reflect this perception; both young women and young men figured all along a continuum ranging from more to less at ease at talking about feelings. This suggests that both young men and women were operating against a background in which the normative cultural convention is one in which women 'do' emotions and talk about emotions more readily and easily than young men and evaluate their own participation in 'emotion' talk in relation to their understanding of this. However, what some young men did seem to be doing, unlike young women, was acknowledging that talking to another man mobilised this discourse in a particular way. They could feel acutely that disclosure was expected of them and that they were somehow failing to deliver on that expectation. Despite these observations I would argue that reaching simplistic conclusions about the relative ease with which young men and women can talk about emotions would be wrong. As Doug's accounts show, whatever gender effects may be present in the context of interviews are also mediated by the resources represented by one's biography. In his case, it was not talking to a man or woman which seemed to be most crucial to the degree of comfort that he felt about expressing and reflecting on his feelings but whether he felt he had chosen to do so, whether he felt confident and close to that person, whether his maturity was threatened or endorsed by that encounter and whether he

perceived that the interaction would in any way supplement the support he could get elsewhere.

The other area into which gender seemed to intrude most discernibly in the interview process was in relation to interviewees' talk about their sexual experiences. This was not something that I asked about directly but it was raised, by just a few interviewees, in the context of talking about how sex and love were configured within relationships. There is good evidence that men have much more power in the sexual economy than women and that talk about sexual experience is potentially status enhancing for young men while for young women it entails risks of damaging their reputation (Holland et al., 1998). However, when coupled with love, talking about sex takes on slightly different connotations in terms of fitting with the negotiation of heterosexual gendered identities. For young women, love can provide access to a discourse around sexual interaction which can either legitimate desire or lead to them being 'used, gaining a bad reputation, getting pregnant or being abandoned' (Holland et al., 1998: 101). For young men love can make sex 'risky' in that it may lead them towards levels of commitment which they are reluctant to make.

These tensions did seem to be evident in some interviews and to be produced in relation to the dynamics set up by gender similarity and difference between me as interviewer and young women and men as interviewees. As I will show in Chapter Six, where I examine how 'serious' relationships and experiences of love are involved in the negotiation of gendered identities, some young men seem aware of their ambivalent attitude towards sex and love. Stephen, for example, referred to



engaging in talk with his male peers about their sexual aspects of their relationships with their girlfriends rather than the emotional dimensions. He sought to distance himself from this in the interview suggesting perhaps that he saw it as an inappropriate form of masculinity to be articulating in relation to me and that the interview provided a 'safe' place for voicing his 'real' interests in sex as a vehicle for the expressions of his feelings.

In a similar way, while young women, like Honore and Hazel were very clear about the risks posed to young women by conflating sex and love, and taking young men's declarations of love at face value, they were unwilling to characterise their own relationships in these terms. In fact, as I will show in Chapter Eight, where I report their comments about parental views on their 'serious' relationships, they rejected the notion that they were unable to make assessments about the integrity of their boyfriends' emotional commitments to them.

I think what was going on here in relation to the negotiation of gender in the context of talking about sex and love is quite complex. Not only were young people negotiating various positions within the 'gendered languages of heterosexuality' in relation to their experiences but also in relation to me. For example, Stephen seemed to be both working out some of the multiple masculine identities that he occupied and in order to do so must have assessed that the interview was a safe place in which to engage in this process. In order to make this evaluation of the suitability of the interview as a place for explicit reflection of this kind he had to assume that I, as a man, understood the differences between these various enactments of his heterosexual masculinity. For Honore and Hazel my gender difference represented a

different background against which to orient their views about heterosexual femininity, love and sex. They could not assume that I would understand their experiences in any empathetic way and perhaps also felt the need to qualify comments which might be perceived as critical of heterosexual masculinities in general by suggesting that not all young men sought to exploit love to get sex.

Although it remains implicit in the examples I am giving here I think it is perfectly plausible that this is an aspect of the interviews in which assumptions about sexuality would also have been having an influence. Stephen's assumptions about what is was safe and not safe to talk with me about in relation to his experiences of his masculinity might well have been inflected by how he perceived not just our gender similarity but also similarities in our sexuality. In the same way Honore and Hazel's tempering of the critique of heterosexual masculinity may have been mediated not just by gender but by an assumption that I was heterosexual.

In addition to discussion about sex and love within interviews alerting me to the dynamics within interviews around gender similarity and difference it also drew my attention to the potential influences that the difference between the interviewees and my age might be having. As a man in early middle-age, it is plausible that the interviewees may have felt that I would be more responsive and sympathetic to configurations of the relationship between sex and love which are conventionally associated with maturity. As I will show in the next chapter, this particular formulation may also have reflected wider contextual influences. In particular, it became very clear that among the sixth year one way of marking 'maturity' (a status-enhancing characteristic) was to be seen as more interested in the emotional than sexual aspects of relationships. One effect of this developing norm within the peer



group was that for both young women and men, prioritising sex over love was talked about as a characteristic associated with their earlier teenage years. For example, Julie talked about these as her 'wild years' and Doug, while still being heavily invested in male friendships where 'relationships for sex' were permissible, rejected this form of 'laddishness' as a mode of personal behaviour.

As this discussion about the ways that gender, and to lesser extent sexuality, were mobilised within the interviews suggests, and as I intimated at the start of this section, reactivity should not be seen as limited to the context of the interview. The 'Dr Love' epithet was instrumental in me coming to acknowledge and understand some of the forms that this 'embeddedness' of the interview in wider processes of young people's identity formation and maintenance might be taking. It contained within it the means by which young people could both acknowledge their participation in the research and manage its implications for their status with friends and peers in multiple ways. It could, for example be used to suggest that their engagement had been light-hearted, that they were distancing themselves from any perception that they might have been engaged in serious, self-revelatory discussion. Equally it could be used to portray the interview as a vehicle for precisely this kind of activity. My supposition is that it may have been used by young people in both of these ways at different times and in relation to different 'audiences' within the social networks. However, in whatever ways 'Dr Love' and its implications for the interview process was mobilised by young people, it indicates that the research was recruited by young people in relation to their negotiation of the self in the context of their peer group. In other words reactivity did not begin or end within the interview,



but struck up a dialogue with processes of co-construction in social interactions outside it.

## **Summary and conclusions**

In this chapter I have described the methods which I used to undertake this research and discussed some of the methodological issues that this raised. I have given a detailed account of ways that I selected and gained access to the research settings where this study took place and, within one of these – the school – recruited young people to the individual interviews and group discussions which generated the data which are analysed in the rest of this thesis. I have also provided a detailed description of the sample of interviewees, and the form and content of the interviews that I conducted with them.

I have argued that they represent a specific case, but that within the conventions of qualitative research the data produced through interviewing them is sufficiently theoretically rich to meet the demands which I placed on them to theorise the relationships between social context and young people's experiences of love in the context of 'serious' emotional relationships. I have also discussed the ontological status of these data, arguing that while it is necessary to accept that the accounts generated by interviews are not transparent but mediated through the interview process and aspects of the relationship between the interviewee and interviewer, they are still capable of 'speaking' of social realities. I suggested that the sociology of emotion supports this argument because it sees accounts of emotional experience as always being referential to social enactments and interactions.

I have concluded this chapter by exploring some of the dimensions of reactivity which can be discerned in the interview data. I have suggested that my positioning as an ‘expert’ on relationship issues was an important element in both facilitating and obstructing some accounts and that this was cross-cut by the influences of gender, and age difference and similarity within the interviews. Furthermore, I also have argued that reactivity reached beyond the confines of the interview interaction in specific ways. By creating a public ‘expert’ role for me, these young people mobilised their participation in the research as a way of negotiating their relationships with friends and people in their wider peer network.

## **Chapter Four: The emergence of ‘serious’ relationships in late adolescence**

### **Introduction**

The sociology of emotion tells us that people’s experiences of love can only be understood in the context of the social relationships, interactions and practices through which they are enacted. Furthermore, it suggests that these enactments are themselves contextualised and shaped by local social structures and moral orders through which the wider influences of the cultural conventions, discourses and narratives associated with love are mediated (Averill, 1985; Harré, 1986; Jackson, 1993). In line with this thesis, the aim of this and the following chapter is to begin to identify and describe some of the specific interactional contexts and practices through which the young people involved in this study enacted their experiences of ‘serious’ relationships and love. I argue that these practices were not only vehicles for the expression of feelings but also shaped and gave meanings to them. I examine how some of these meanings were drawn from and refer to wider cultural conventions, discourses and narratives about love.

In order to sustain and development this argument the first part of this chapter is given over to an exploration of how young people’s heterosexual relationships become an interactional context for experiences of love and what they termed ‘serious’ relationships. I show how they locate ‘serious’ relationships within a particular typology of relationships which was a meaningful way of organising their experiences although they achieved this is an uneven and sometimes contradictory fashion. Within this typology I show how these young people saw the ‘serious’ relationships that they were forming at the time that I interviewed as different from



those that they had had before. This was in part due to the fact that they expected them to be interactions which might be defined primarily in terms of their and their partner's reciprocal emotional investments. As I show in the next chapter, investments which might - although not uniformly - also encompass the experience of falling in love. In the second part of this chapter I describe how these 'serious' relationships were formed, how these young people met their partners, what they found attractive about them and how they negotiated the processes of 'going out' together.

### **Love's awakening: The emergence of the 'serious' relationship**

**SF:** So tell me, have you had any relationships prior to this one?

**Scott:** Not really no (.) well, nothing that's kinda, well nothing really serious.

**SF:** So what's changed?

**Scott:** I mean, I suppose there's been people before and (..) just kind of romance (..) kind of (..) sexual feelings for people, but nothing proper, nothing serious if you know what I mean.

**SF:** Ok so what do you think has changed, then?

**Scott:** Just that erm (.) who she was and (.) maybe the people before weren't really interested more in you, they were just kind of (.) that particular age. Yeah. It wasn't ever that they were interested (.) you know, kinda in the same things as you and whatever.

**SF:**      **And what's a serious relationship then?**

**Scott:**    Well, I mean, more emotional (.) and I suppose, you know,  
being interested in each other for those reasons. Being in love  
I suppose you could say.

As this extract from my first interview with Scott illustrates, the 'serious' relationship, in which two young people would be 'interested' in each other, engage in mutual emotional investment and even perhaps, as a result, fall in love, was perceived as a newly emergent form of heterosexual coupledness among the young people that I interviewed in the school. For many of these young people, like Scott, the emphasis on emotional investments and connections in their more recent relationships distinguished them from prior forms of relationship in which 'romantic' and/or 'sexual' interests were more to the fore. While Scott seemed to be mildly dismissive about these relationships, referring to them as 'nothing proper', some other interviewees were much more trenchant in their views about their inferiority to 'serious' relationships. While most young people still seemed to display a degree of tolerance for relationships primarily configured by what they termed 'romance', relationships where emotional attraction and attachment were seen to be subordinate to sexual attraction and intimacy, were regarded by some as distinctly inferior. This view was particularly forcefully articulated by Sophie, Chloe and Marnie in the context of our group discussion. This exchange resulted from me raising with them the ideas about the different forms of relationship that Scott and other young people had seeded in my mind through individual interviews.

**SF:** I get the impression that there are different kinds of relationships. Some are about romance and others about sexual attraction between two people, and then others which are about making an emotional connections and commitment. What do you think?

**Sophie:** I think people still do have romantic relationships. It's kind of mushy stuff, you know doing what you're supposed to do when you're in love.

**Chloe:** [B]ut not really in love.

**Sophie:** Yeah, it's like a version of what you're supposed do. Holding hands and just being ((laughs)) mushy with each other.

**SF:** And what about the other kinds of relationships?

**Marnie:** I think people do go through a time when it's, you ken, mostly about sex, to be honest. You kind of, kind of need to get that out of the way before you can really get emotionally involved.

**Sophie:** I don't think anyone should be having relationships just for sex, not now, not our age. It's pretty much wrong, I think.

**Chloe:** I wouldn't want to. I'd be looking for, for something more (.) serious and emotional. Just sex, no.

This was the clearest and strongest articulation of young people's views about the hierarchy of forms of relationships to be found in the data. Certainly it could be argued that the dynamics of the group and the way that I posed the question may have been influential in the production of such robust views which emphasised the differences between forms of relationships. Although I did not imply a 'ranking' of



relationships, I did suggest that these were different forms and hence invite their evaluation through comparison. In addition, it could be argued that for young women it might be no easy matter to take an alternative position on the relative status of these forms of relationship, and especially the inferiority of relationships which were primarily sexual, in the presence of a male interviewer and their female peers. To do so might involved them in having to renegotiate the constraints imposed by the 'gendered languages of heterosexuality'; a language which mobilise heterosexual femininity via discourses that privilege love over sex (Holland et al. 1998: 100).

However, despite these caveats, these were not the only statements of this kind about the relative status of 'sexual', 'romantic' and 'serious' relationships to be found within the data; they did not all emerge through direct questioning, and they did not all come from young women, as Scott's earlier comments demonstrate. As a consequence, it seems plausible to argue that, to a greater or lesser degree, these young people themselves deployed this hierarchical categorisation of relationships in which 'serious' relationships were given higher status than the 'inferior' types of relationships ('romantic' and 'sexual') engaged in by younger children and adolescents.

Indeed, in addition to identifying these different kinds of relationship, some other interviewees also followed Sophie, Chloe and Marnie in establishing a link between 'serious' relationships and maturity. The 'serious' relationship was seen as the most mature and desirable form. The 'romantic' relationship might be tolerated, but as these young women seem to be implying, within it the conventional enactments of romance could be a substitute for love rather than representing or symbolising anything real. Engagement in a relationship primarily for sex was seen as implying

the least maturity and while Sophie, Chloe and Marnie seemed to indicate that it could be understood as a form of relationship through which it was necessary to pass in order to ‘get sex out of the way’ – that is, presumably to lose one’s virginity – it was not perceived to be age-appropriate for this to remain the focal concern within or motivation for a relationship among young people at this point in their lives.

What I am suggesting here is that there is a linear and age-related progression through relationships, from those oriented primarily around ‘sex’ through to those oriented around ‘romance’ to those oriented around the ‘serious’. However, it is important to be alert to the fact that although the typology proposed by Sophie, Chloe and Marne seemed to be meaningful to other interviewees, the view that its progression was linear, and moreover, associated directly with maturity, was neither salient to all of them nor did it resonate with all of their experiences. For example, the accounts of some interviewees suggested that, while the sequence of motivating interests and investments in relationships was meaningful and applicable to their own lives, these might not be experienced through a series of different relationships but be phases within one relationship. Moreover, in at least one case, that of Doug, these changes were not perceived to be linked to maturity but might be more closely associated with events taking place outside the relationship and bearing on them. I present an extract from his account which seems to illustrate this in Chapter Eight. However, in summary, Doug had been in a relationship with his girlfriend for four years. He characterised this relationship as involving periods of intense mutual and reciprocal emotional investment which were not associated with either his or his girlfriend’s age but with a death in each of their families. He cited both of these

events as significant moments at which their mutual emotional investment in the relationship had been amplified as they looked for and found support in each other.

For some other young people it was the linear aspect of the typology that was not applicable to their experiences of relationships. For example, in Angie's account of her current relationship it is possible to see her moving back and forth between these different kinds of investment and interest – 'sexual', 'romantic' and 'serious'. She described how this relationship began on the basis of mutual sexual attraction and interaction, but over time, she and her boyfriend had grown closer and emotional intimacy had developed. This then became the focal point of their relationship.

Subsequently, at the time of our interview, Angie had begun to question the depth of her feelings for this boyfriend and was even thinking that the relationship might end. She described herself as shifting her investment in the relationship again, towards the enjoyment of its sexual and romantic aspects.

A third way of understanding and organising this typology in relation to personal experiences emerged in my first interview with Gareth. He was looking for a 'serious' relationship and was considering asking a young woman to go out with him at this time. However, he was still having what he described as 'different' relationships with young women which were essentially casual and involved consensual sex. Gareth did not see these as immature but categorised them in a similar way to the 'copping off' relationships that I referred to in the previous chapter where I reviewed Louise Allen (2004) and Peter Redman's (1999) research on teenagers' relationships. As Gareth put it:



Gareth: I am, well right now actually, thinking of asking someone out.

SF: Are you? What do you think will happen?

Gareth: Well I hope she says yes. I think she will. We've kind of touched on it already, I suppose.

SF: And what's attracted you to her?

Gareth: She's a nice person really. I hope we'll get on and maybe, you know, it will be serious and (.) perhaps we'll get really close. I hope so anyway.

SF: Would that be different to your other relationships?

Gareth: Well, yes. I mean I do go out with girls, well not so much go out but like get off with them at parties and that. You know, it's just what happens. I suppose they're basically physical relationships. The way I see it is if you're both happy with that it's ok.

As the experiences of Doug, Angie and Gareth demonstrate, in broad terms the typology of relationships proposed by Sophie, Chloe and Marnie was meaningful to these young people but the relationship between maturity and forms of relationships that they proposed underwent reconfiguration according to interviewee's personal experiences. It is also possible that they inhabited these different forms of relationship in different contexts. However, despite the importance of bearing in mind such qualifications and the complexities of their personal experiences of relationships, I think it is still plausible to argue that the 'serious' relationship was the yardstick against which other forms of relationships were judged. If this is the case, then neither Doug's, Angie's nor Gareth's accounts represent an outright

rejection of these links between forms of relationship, status, age and maturity, but attempts to renegotiating them in order to manage, simultaneously, their understanding of their current and past relationships and their subjectivity in the context of the interview process. For all these young people what seemed to be important was that the kind of relationship that they formed or were having was reciprocal, that is that both they and their partner were invested in it to the same degree and attached the same meanings to it. This seems to draw on the democratic view of relationships in that while love is an ideal, other forms of relationship are perfectly acceptable and meaningful as long as they involve some form of confluence in the kinds of investment being made between both partners.

### *Early relationships*

While the typology described above referred to the relatively recent forms of relationship among these young people, some interviewees also went further and discussed in detail the forms of relationship in which they engaged when they were in their early teenage years. Through interviews with Lynsey, Hayley and Shane, for example, a picture emerged of some of the forms of relationship which took place between the ages of 10 and 13. Lynsey described her experiences at this time in terms of 'kiddy' relationships. These were 'silly little relationships' which she thought had been common among her peer group in early adolescence. These relationships, she suggested, were characteristically short, essentially truncating the whole relationship into the practices of being asked out (or being asked out) and breaking up. She illustrated this pattern recalling her experiences of going out with a boy when she was around 12 years old.

Lynsey: It was a real classic first-year relationship. One of those ‘will you go out with me’. ‘Ok’. ‘You’re chucked’ sort of thing...I remember doing this with someone ‘blah blah bah so do you dare me to kiss him?’ So when you’re playing a game it’s like, ‘Ok I dare you to kiss her for 10 seconds’ – it’s like ((grimacing and miming a kiss)) ‘ohhh!’

In referring to the ‘dare’ Lynsey seemed to be associating these relationships closely with the processes of negotiating positions and relationships within the wider peer group. Shane made this link more explicit, emphasising the role that these relationships might play in the maintenance of position and status within the peer group and their sites as experimentation with and rehearsal of the gendered conventions of heterosexual relationships (Epstein, 1997; Epstein and Johnson, 1998). Shane’s account also involved a dare, in this case to kiss a girl. He explicitly linked this to the construction of his heterosexual masculine identity in relation to the same-sex peer group. As Shane put it, relationships of this kind and at this point in time were more about ‘other lads’ than any pursuit of emotional intimacy with the ‘lasses’:

Shane: When you go out with someone and you’re maybe 12 or 13 years old, it’s not really a relationship at all. It’s about doing what your pals are doing and what they dare you to do. Otherwise you’d be losing face with them. I don’t think it’s anything to with the lasses then really. You could say you do it for the lads I suppose.



While the (re)construction of relationship histories in the context of the interview could be seen as an attempt to differentiate them from earlier and subsequent relationships and to emphasise the ‘seriousness’ of the latter, it did not mean that earlier relationships were regarded as unimportant or in other ways linked to current experience. As Shane went on to suggest, his relationships in his early adolescence were, in part, generative of his later experiences. They were testing grounds for finding out what relationships might involve and what possibilities they might provide as interactional contexts through which emotional investments might be made. As he put it, ‘You have to go through that. You know as you have relationships you kind of build on what happened before. They might look embarrassing now but they made sense then. Without them you couldn’t be wherever you are now’.

It seems here that Shane is drawing on a particular version of narratives around relationship experiences and I want to reflect at this point on how this and other cultural resources, discourses and narratives were being mobilised in these accounts of young people’s relationship histories. First, it did seem as if the conventional romantic narrative was an important point of orientation around which these relationship histories could be ‘spoken’. These young people saw their relationships, both past and present as having trajectories, beginnings, middles and ends, even if these were sometimes massively attenuated as they were in Lynsey’s account of her ‘kiddy relationships’. I am not suggesting that these were ‘romantic’ relationships but they referenced and drew on the conventions of that genre in terms of about talking about relationships as stories. Where relationship experiences were more

extended there were also references to significant and potentially transformative moments when something changed in the depth and intensity of the relationship and in the individual's perceptions of both themselves and the object of their love. Doug's account of the influence of the two family bereavements on his relationship with his girlfriend seemed to illustrate this and may in doing so draw on some aspects of the conventions of romance in which trials or problems of one sort or another help to cement an emotional relationship. However, alongside this, and sometimes within the same accounts, there was evidence of more 'realist' discourses being used to account for relationships and experiences within them. Angie, for example, seemed to be moving between romantic narratives, realist and democratic 'scripts' in her description of her current relationship. This was particularly the case as she moved towards a position at the end of the account where she could mobilise the distinctions between these various 'scripts' to separate and make meaningful a relationship which could be satisfying in sexual and romantic terms and yet not involve an emotional investment which might equate with or lead to falling in love. What these and other accounts suggest is that these young people did not see these various forms of 'script' as prescriptive, but resources which could be activated and deployed both as a means to enact and to account for their relationship experiences. All this, however, does not take place against a value-free background in which any form of relationship is possible, but as Jackie Stacey and Lynn Pearce (1995) suggest, one in which despite coming under pressure, the romance narrative and the ideal of love still has high status as the basis for 'serious' relationships.

To return to the issue of the trajectory of these young people's relationships, some other research suggests that the account given here, may in its broadest sense, also be

found among other groups of young people (Furman et al. 1999; Moore and Leung, 2001; Redman, 1999; Vrachouritou, 2003). For example, Peter Redman (1999: 248-256), writing about the relationship histories of young men, proposes a basic framework in which pre-romantic relationships begin towards the end of the primary school years and, after a period of abeyance around the times of transition to the secondary sector, reappear in a romantic form around Year 9 (when the young men were 13 and 14 years old) and become more serious and recognisably 'adult' in the post-compulsory years 12 and 13 (when the young men are between 16 and 18 years old). Within this framework he reports that young men spoke about having 'proper' girlfriends in the middle phase and associated these relationships with romantic and sexual desires. This contrasted with earlier relationships which were much more often bound up with achieving or maintaining status with their male peers and hence propping up 'proper' forms of heterosexual masculinity. Ioanna Vrachouritou's (2003) study of how children and adolescents understand and perceive romantic love and relationships charts a somewhat analogous trajectory in which young people's conceptualisations of romantic relationships shift between their pre- and mid-teenage years. In the pre-teenage years they envision them as primarily passionate whereas it is companionate dimensions which are identified as more important as they get older. In his analysis Redman raises questions about the potential relationship between the emergence of interest in what he terms 'proper' relationships and the transition to post-compulsory education. This is an issue which I will return to in Chapter Seven where I look at transitions to the sixth year and expectations of transitions from the sixth year influence these young people's views and experiences of their 'serious' relationships. For the moment I want to progress my description of 'serious' relationship among the young people involved in this study by examining how these



relationships are formed, how these young people met their partners, what they found attractive about them and how they negotiated the processes of ‘going out’ together.

## **Forming ‘serious’ relationships**

### *First encounters and attraction*

The young people involved in this study met their partners in a variety of contexts and ways. At the time of interviews nine interviewees (Scott, Angus, Doug, Angie, Gareth, Shane, Ross, Dan and Stephanie) were all in relationships with people they had met at school. Stephen had met his girlfriend through work and Franco, Julie, Lynsey and Hayley had all met their partners through social and leisure activities. In some cases, and inevitably for those young people who had met their partner in school, they had known their girlfriend or boyfriend for some time before they had formed a relationship with them. For these young people, their ‘serious’ relationship had grown out of either a friendship or was a result of a specific event or encounter. For example, Scott had been friends with his girlfriend in school. They had shared common interests in visiting museums, art galleries and going to concerts and he saw their relationship as having grown out these. Angus had met his girlfriend through her brother who was a friend of his. He had known her some time only as his friend’s ‘little sister’ but they grew to know each when he visited the house and eventually they formed a relationship. While these interviewees gave accounts in which a ‘serious’ relationship had emerged relatively slowly from a friendship, for others the transformation had been sudden and was described in dramatic terms. For example, Stephanie suggested that the relationship she formed between our two interviews had come about through a sudden realisation on her part that her boyfriend ‘was the nicest guy’ as they talked one day in the sixth year common room. Up until then he

had simply been a friend. Angie described a sexual encounter with her boyfriend in the context of an impulsive act of truancy as the moment when she realised that 'our relationship might be something more than just friends'. For those who knew their partners less well before they formed a relationship with them there were also specific, significant moments which for them marked what Stephen called the 'start of something'. In his case this was going to a party with young woman with whom he worked and ending up talking to her all night. For Lynsey it was a 'blind date' arranged by a friend with someone she had met during an evening out at a nightclub.

In all the interviews I asked young people to describe what had first attracted them to their partner. A number of themes emerged here around their personalities, their looks and common interests or pastimes. However, all of these were assembled around the idea of that there was some kind of emotional connection or resonance between the interviewee and their future partner and that this was what made them particularly interesting and attractive. Furthermore, the partner shared an interest in exploring this and engaging with what Ross described as 'finding out about me, what kind of person I am and me finding out about them as a person as well'. As Hayley explained this was so important that other aspects, such as a person's appearance could be seen as either subordinate to or bound up with it. For her, while 'being nice looking' was important, this was not sufficient grounds in itself for her to consider forming a 'serious' relationship with someone and moreover was dependent on a person's other attributes especially their emotional openness and the care and attention that they might pay to her. This is apparent in the following.

Hayley: I think it does matter if they're nice looking (.) I suppose. I mean beauty is only skin deep and I think you see a person as kind of physically attractive when they've got a good personality. When they care about you and are sort of open with their feelings...they become an attractive person. It's all in the eye of the beholder.

It is important to note however, that attraction might have other bases. For example, in Stephanie's description of what she found attractive in young men as potential partners she drew on her understanding of the influence on her emotional needs of her relationship with her father. For Stephanie attraction was not based solely on the realisation that someone was interested in 'finding out' about her and in letting her learn about them but a need to form an attachment which could in some ways be a substitute for the attention and affection she felt her father failed to show her.

Stephanie said that her father had been unfaithful to her mother. He had left the family when she was two or three years old and subsequently her parents had divorced and he had remarried. Although she still had some contact with him and said that she loved her father, she felt that her love was unreciprocated. She gave as an example an account of learning that a pony that she had thought he had bought her as a gift had in fact been bought by her mother. She explained to me that what she wanted from her father was a clear demonstration of his love and, in its absence she sought a substitute for paternal love in her relationships with her boyfriends.

Stephanie: 'Cos well supposedly, the thing is a girl looks for her father's qualities in a guy that she goes with, and I did see a lot of my



dad looking back, thinking 'Oh God'. But in a way it just kinda made me feel special for a change. Erm. (..) He just reminded me kinda a little bit of my dad. Just some of the things he said and how lazy he could be and I was like, 'Oh for God's sake, I know.' (.) I was drawn to him. Erm. Just (.) little things that he did or said, and I'd be like, 'It's my dad?' ((laughs)) ...also, you're meant to go with like the appearance, and he kinda did look like my dad, like he's really tall and he's really big and stuff, so.

I think a number of things may be going on here. It is possible that for Stephanie this particular way of reading her experiences was being mobilised in relation to her perceptions of my role and interests. As I described in Chapter Three, perceptions of my 'expertise' in relationship matters may have made available to interviewees ways of understanding and articulating their relationship experiences which referenced therapeutic practices and their associated discourses. In addition, by framing her account in this way Stephanie may be signalling the lack of control that she feels over her emotions in her relationships with men. I would also suggest, however, that this account alerts us to how young people may be (re)telling their experiences of a relationship in the light of how it plays out and, where they exist, subsequent relationships. In Stephanie's case the relationship described above ended badly with her boyfriend 'two-timing' her. In this context, knowing where her account is leading, Stephanie may be seeing, even in its beginnings, traces of the problems to come and reflecting this in the way that she frames and develops her account. One of the reasons that I draw attention to this point is that it is important to acknowledge

that this process may also be taking place in other young people's accounts. One of the effects of asking them to (re)construct the narrative of their 'serious' relationships may have been to invite them make sense of them and also to make them make sense. Of course, this is not to suggest that these accounts are purely artefactual, but to emphasise that they are always 'works in progress'. In other words, it may be that the interviews and the benefit of hindsight made some forms of interpretation of their experiences available to young people that would not have been available at the time when they took place. This is not to argue that one interpretation is more accurate than the other, but to emphasise that young people's understandings of their relationships are ongoing. It is impossible to achieve unmediated access to them, whether they are taking place in the present or have taken place in the past, and as a consequence it is necessary to be cautious about privileging either hindsight or the contemporaneous. However, while this renders young people's accounts partial it does not mean that they are bear no relation to the social realities of their experiences.

#### *From attraction to 'serious' relationship*

For all of the interviewees there was a period of getting to know the person to whom they were attracted before they formally started a relationship. This was the case whether or not they knew someone 'as a friend' before they considered them a potential girlfriend or boyfriend. What seemed to matter was not whether a young person knew their potential partner, but how well they knew them. As a consequence interviewees often talked about there being a period of time in which they 'felt each other out', assessed their interests and their interest in forming a 'serious'

relationship and established whether they were equally invested in the processes of ‘finding out’ about each other as referred to by Ross referred.

Although both young women and men talked about this period as important the interview data suggest that it was acted out in relation to some assumptions about masculinity and femininity which are embedded in heterosexuality. These assumptions are configured around perceptions of the differences in women’s and men’s willingness, capacity and interest in talking about personal issues and especially sharing their feelings and vulnerabilities. All of the young women involved in this study shared to some degree Angie’s perception that they might need to be sensitive to creating conditions and circumstances under which young men could begin to talk about themselves, and especially to disclose their feelings. Here Angie emphasises that this takes place via the internet, an environment in which her boyfriend found it ‘easier to talk’.

Angie: We’d have conversations and he’d tell me that he liked me and stuff, but nothing would ever happen. We used to talk on MSN a lot. I think he found it easier to talk on there. He used to tell me lots of stuff... We used to talk about school and stuff. And then he started to open up, talking about other things. Like he told me about his family and that’s he’s got quite a tough time of it at home. That kind of made us bond about things. That’s when we started going out together.



In Angie's references to her boyfriend telling her that he liked her and yet 'nothing would ever happen' it may be she is suggesting that she saw these exchanges as an attempt on her part to enable her boyfriend to 'open up' and talk about feelings for her and eventually make a commitment to forming a 'serious' relationship. This also seemed to be happening in Hayley's account of the formation of her relationship with her boyfriend. Hayley explained that she had become more attracted to him when she discovered that he was cautious about disclosing his feelings for her because he, like her, had been 'two-timed' in a previous relationship. She too tried to create an environment in which he could express his concerns about this happening again and through doing so built up trust between them before they started their relationship.

I am not seeking to suggest here that young men neither enjoyed nor attached importance to disclosing their feelings and vulnerabilities. Stephen, for example, attached a great deal of significance to 'spending the whole night at a party just talking' when he first met his girlfriend. He found it, 'Amazing. I loved just talking to her. We really clicked and I felt I could tell her anything'. However, I am suggesting that both young women and men come to these processes aware of gendered positions and interests created, among other contexts, within the heterosexual culture of schooling (Epstein and Johnson, 1998). Moreover, I am suggesting that they had to find ways of negotiating these positions and interests. Since the public version of heterosexual masculinity prizes independence, emotional resilience and control, for young men this involves negotiating the potential risks which might be posed by engaging in acts of disclosure, especially when this relates to their feelings and vulnerabilities (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 1996: 55). For young women it involves negotiating risks that young men might exploit their acts of

disclosure, either by sharing them with others or by using the intimacy that they create to obtain sex. In consequence, for young women the process of ‘feeling each other out’ provides a means to establish that young men are willing and able to invest in them and a ‘serious’ relationship and can be trusted (Holland et al. 1998: 94).

### *‘Asking out’*

As Angie’s account above suggests, it was after having established a level of mutual and reciprocal investment in forming a ‘serious’ relationship that young people formally ‘started going out’. There were two striking patterns within the interview data in relation to this aspect of young people’s experiences. First, the young people identified starting to go out as a specific event within a ‘serious’ relationship, and second, it was always, without exception, young men who ‘did the asking’.

‘Asking out’ seems to have had symbolic importance as marking the ‘beginning’ of that relationship and, perhaps in order to acknowledge this, the act was frequently ‘staged’ in some way by the young men involved (Duncombe and Marsden, 1995). This staging often referenced a romantic ‘script’, although sometimes in a manner designed to subvert its conventions (Redman, 2002: 66). In order to reflect the diversity of experience among these young people, in what follows I want to focus on three accounts of ‘asking out’ in which the staging of this practice is acknowledged and managed in different ways. Franco references and resists romanticising the event; Shane actively mobilises romance conventions to stage the act of asking his girlfriend out; and in the last account, Stephanie uses the conventions of romance to frame her account of being asked out.

Franco: I wanted it to be really unromantic actually. I know that sounds a bit silly, but what I mean is, you know, I wanted it be special because it wasn't like done in a certain way that it's supposed to be done. I didn't want it to be a big deal. We already knew we were together it was just a matter of saying so I suppose. So I just said, 'If this is how we feel then we're going out together'.

In this extract from our interview Franco explained how he intentionally tried to avoid romanticising the act of asking his girlfriend to go out with him. He tried not to make 'a big deal' of the event by subsuming it into talking to his girlfriend about their feelings for each other and telling me that they were 'already...together'. This contrasts with Shane's account, taken from our first interview, in which he described explicitly utilising the conventions of romance to stage asking his girlfriend to go out with him. He created a romantic climate by taking her for a walk. He prepared himself by thinking about what he wanted to say. He also recruited some mutual friends who, he implied, he had briefed on his plans. Their role is unclear, but perhaps Shane was expecting that they would act as go-betweens so that his girlfriend would be ready to 'play her part' in the drama he had arranged, and also reassure Shane that she will not refuse him.

Shane: It was just er (.) we met up one night, me and (.) her friend and my friend. They knew what was coming. We'd met up and we went a walk together and just, we spoke about it all and I



kinda, before I sorta done that, I was thinking about what to say and I was kinda nervous (.) so (..)

**SF:**        **So you were kind of nervous. And what did you want to say to her then?**

Shane:      [I d]on't know, I just wanted to come out with it, tell her the truth, how I felt.

**SF:**        **And then you managed to that night?**

Shane:      Yeah. OK.

**SF:**        **And how did she respond?**

Shane:      Quite well, considering what I thought she would, how she was gonna respond. She replied the way that I was hoping she would reply, she just told me that she felt the same (..) and that she would go out with me. It all worked out fine.

Unlike Franco, Shane suggested to me that he was less confident that he had established his feelings towards his girlfriend and that his feelings were reciprocated. In this light, his staging of the act of 'asking out' was perhaps a means of enabling himself to conquer both the nervousness this instilled in him about her response and created a specific space over which he had control and in which he could articulate his feelings.

In this third example, once again taken from my first interview with Stephanie, something quite different is going on. Stephanie was explicitly utilising a well-known romantic 'script', one portrayed in the film *Dirty Dancing*, through which to frame the account of being asked out. Clearly, Stephanie's use of this film as a

reference point was self-conscious – she stresses the clichéd nature of the correspondence between her experiences and those portrayed in the film – but nonetheless she seemed to engage with the conventions reflected in that story around relationship formation as a means of sharing her excitement and indexing the intensity of the event. This experience took place in the context of a school dance. Stephanie and her boyfriend were designated to oversee this (it was for students in S2).

Stephanie: I had...to chaperone two dances...and he was there and I was like, I'd just kinda go away from him a bit and he'd go, 'Talk to me'...he was kinda staring at me all night, and waited to the last dance before he asked me to dance with him. And he chose the song and he was like, it was, this might be really a cliché about, *Dirty Dancing*, 'I had the time of my life', but it's my favourite song, I'm a dancer, love the movie and he chose it and that was our first dance. He had no clue! He lucky guesses... I got all excited, I was like. 'Wow!' And I was like, 'I love this song!' I wanted to dance myself and I was like, damn! ((laughs)) I could see the song like when he jumps in, when Patrick Swayze is coming sort of doing the dance up this aisle, and I could see myself doing that ((laughs)) in my head ...I kinda didn't really want to look at him in the eye. 'Cos I get really embarrassed. And then I did, and then, (.) our first kiss and that was when sparks flew, my friend. That's when he asked me out.

By indexing her experiences to this particular story I think one of things that Stephanie is able to do is to emphasise the significance of a variety of incidents. *Dirty Dancing* provides is a powerful narrative structure through which Stephanie emphasised aspects of her experience. The fact that her future boyfriend ‘stared at her all night’ suggested a hint of potency and erotic attraction. His miraculous choice of her favourite song became a signal of their like-mindedness, the fact that they were ‘meant for each other’. Waiting for the last dance helped to suggest the tension and excitement that she felt and which was released in an electrifying first kiss at the culmination of the account. By using a very specific romantic script Stephanie was able to become, as Ros Brunt has put it, the ‘star in own movie’ (Brunt 1988: 19).

In a sense the second striking feature of these accounts to which I referred – that it is always young men who do the ‘asking out’ – can be seen an extension of the romantic conventions being mobilised in relation to these social practices. According to this ‘script’ it is men who notice women and are the active agents in relationships, it is men who have the power to make a choice about the form of commitment being made (Stacey and Pearce, 1995: 17-18 ; Holland et al. 1998: 91). This also has to be seen in the light of comments that I made above about how young people were engaged in negotiating the public demands that gendered heterosexuality imposes on forming relationships. I would suggest that allowing young men to take the lead on ‘asking out’ is an extension of processes by which young women establish their willingness to commit to a ‘serious’ relationship. It is also a way of acknowledging the risks that the young men involved are taking with their masculinity and the power differentials between women and men which adhere to gender within heterosexual relationships.



## Summary and conclusions

I want to conclude this chapter by summarising the main aspects of the account of the emergence and formation of young people's 'serious' relationships that I have so far developed. With reference primarily to the data generated through individual interviews I have argued that these young people saw 'serious' relationships as a relatively new and emergent form of heterosexual relationship in their lives. What makes a 'serious' relationship serious, and differentiates it from other forms of relationship in which they may have been engaged, is that it is an interactional context both partners share investments in mutuality, reciprocity and emotional intimacy. This makes the 'serious' relationship a context in which love becomes possible.

I have also shown that many of these young people reconstruct their earlier relationship experiences in relation to the idea of there being a broad trajectory which leads to the 'serious' relationship. During their mid-adolescence this trajectory might involve relationships which were perceived to be organised primarily around sexual attraction and attachments, and around 'romance'. Prior to this, in early adolescence, relationships were sometimes characterised as being organised around the maintenance of relationships within the same-sex peer group and the negotiation of heterosexuality and gender. Some young people saw each of these forms of relationship as superseding the other and each as more associated with increasing maturity.

However, I have argued that the data also suggest there is a great deal of diversity of experience around this account. Some young people have ongoing relationships in which at various times, and not necessarily in the order suggested by the above trajectory, they see their focal investment as being sexual or romantic as well as 'serious'. Others do not see changes in the nature of their relationships as related in especially significant ways to the transition through school but more closely linked to events outside it, for example taking place in their family. This is an issue that I will explore more closely in Chapter Eight. In Chapter Seven I will pick up the theme around transitions and explore both the relationship between the emergence of 'serious' relationships and transition into the sixth year and the ways that the prospect of leaving school was influencing young people's views and experiences of these relationships.

In this chapter I have suggested that there is a culture of relationship possibilities among these young people. This involves a typology which is widely recognised by interviewees and in relation to which they orient and elaborate their experiences whether or not they closely conform to it. Within this culture, partly by drawing on 'scripts' offered by the romantic, realist and democratic accounts of love, these young people can find ways of occupying a variety of positions in relation to the kinds of relationship that they want. I am also suggesting, however, that this culture may apply specifically to the school and, within this even more particularly to the negotiation of social interaction between young people in the sixth-form common room.

This level of contingency on social setting is also indicated by the differences between my experiences in the youth club and the school. In the youth club, relationships were hardly to be seen at all. There was no evidence that the negotiation of social groups within the setting involved interest or engagement in particular forms of relationships. This is, of course, not to say that they were not germane to these young people in other settings. However, what it suggests is that 'serious' relationships may not emerge so explicitly in all social contexts as they did in the school or play the role in managing its culture. As Peter Redman (1999) has observed in relation to schools, it is not just likely, but to be expected, that there will be local variations in young people's relationships cultures 'in response to varying pupils' and formal school cultures, according to the social geography of the locality in which the school is situated, and according to differences in, for example, age, class and ethnicity between pupils' (Redman, 1999: 255).



## **Chapter Five: ‘Doing’ ‘serious’ relationships and falling in love**

### **Introduction**

My aim in this chapter is to continue the detailed description of young people’s experiences of their ‘serious’ relationships which I began in Chapter Four. Having described therein the formation of these relationships I will now look at young people’s accounts of how they spent their time together and some of the practices which they regarded as especially meaningful in terms of their emotional experiences of their ‘serious’ relationships and particularly falling in love. The three practices on which I will focus are young people’s accounts of engagement in intimate disclosure, in penetrative sexual intercourse, and having arguments and making up.

It is important to stress that by structuring my analysis in this way that I am not suggesting that all these young people’s relationships conformed to this trajectory. For example, while most interviewees’ accounts could be mapped onto a structure in which they formed a relationship, grew closer, and then fell in love, this was not universally the case. For instance, both Dan and Angus were unsure if they had fallen in love with their partners. In addition, there was variation between young people’s accounts in the degree of significance that they attached to the practices of intimate disclosure, penetrative sexual intercourse, and arguing and making up. However, as I will demonstrate, the broad trajectory which I outline here is a plausible description of the general tendency. I will explore some of the factors which may be influencing young people’s affiliation to it in the context of Chapters Six, Seven and Eight.

## **‘Doing’ ‘serious’ relationships**

### *Spending time together*

Going out with someone in the context of a ‘serious’ relationship involved young people in spending time with each other. Although some interviewees saw their partners in school, these meetings tended to be fleeting, taking place between lessons and during breaks. Even if couples did see each other in school it was not always a context in which they felt easy about enacting their relationship. This was certainly the case for Shane, Scott, Angie, Gareth, Dan and Angus. These young people shared Gareth’s view that it was both potentially ‘uncool’ to make too much of a relationship in school and could also licence people to trespass on an essentially private part of life. As Gareth put it:

Gareth: I think it’s a bit uncool actually to be too much together [with your partner] in school. It’s like you’re trying to make yourself look more mature or something. Also because it’s so public and I feel like a relationship is really a private thing. People just gossip about you if go out in school.

For other young people, like Doug and Stephanie, it was less problematic to enact their relationship in school although they too felt that, as Doug put it, ‘just being normal with each other was important’. Given these constraints it was no surprise that for most of the young people involved in this study spending time together meant meeting during the evening, at weekends and during the holidays.

It was commonly the case that as their ‘serious’ relationships developed for many interviewees what Scott termed the ‘romantic’ experiences that characterised the early stages of the relationship gave way to more everyday practices: Sharing hobbies and interests; going to the cinema, pubs and clubs and occasionally eating out together; and, watching television programmes and films together in one or other of their family homes.

Scott: I suppose it started more, it was kind of a romantic relationship to start with, but then over time, just spending more time doing other things, you know. Like going places, going to (.) theatres maybe, and more int-, interesting hobby kinda things rather than just dates, if you know what I mean, like cinema, dinner, but more kind of like things we were interested in, like maybe go to museums or things like that or just other things like, that.

Although Scott foregrounded ‘going places’ with his girlfriend as part of their relationship, for others trips and outings were relatively rare occurrences. For Ross, Angus, Doug, Lynsey, Stephanie, Julie, Angie, Shane, Dan and Stephen spending time together with their partners generally meant visiting one or other of their family homes. This often became a routine practice. For Ross and his girlfriend this was so much so that it had become a kind of joke.

Ross: We see each other usually in the weekend. Maybe on a Saturday, sometimes both days. Usually two or three times



through the week ...Just er, just now it's turned into, 'What time are you coming round?', 'Ah the usual time.' Ok. You know, that sort of thing ((laughs)).

Similarly Lynsey was also amused by the pattern which had developed with her boyfriend in which they 'stayed in' and watched television programmes and films together. Although she enjoyed this, she suggests here somehow it ran counter to her expectations of what a 'serious' relationship might involve equating to the behaviour of 'an old couple' rather than young people.

Lynsey: We used to make jokes like we were just like an old couple, 'cause we never used to do anything. I just used to like just to get a film and just sit, and then instead of going out for meals and stuff, I think we went out for one meal in the course of a year ((laughs)) really, it was for my birthday, he took me out for my birthday ((laughs))...Eh. Once the OC started, I don't know if you watch the OC, Orange County, once it came on, on Tuesday nights, we'd have an OC night. Where he'd come round to my house and watch the OC.

It may be that the lack of cheap, social and leisure provision for young people was a factor here but as I will go on to show, these everyday practices represented much more than ways of avoiding unsustainable levels of financial outlay or problems with finding things to do. What spending time together seemed to represent was, first and foremost, commitment to the relationship and desire to be with one's partner in it. It

was also about creating a private, physical and emotional space in which two people could become close and intimate and have opportunities to find out about each other. This meant that even watching television together might be important because it symbolised commitment, common interest and 'togetherness'. While this aspect of everyday 'spending time together' remains somewhat implicit in Scott, Ross and Lynsey's accounts, its importance is made much more explicit by Julie in her description of how she experiences the day-to-day absence of her boyfriend when their commitments preclude them from seeing each other. This came from our second interview:

Julie: Sometimes I really miss him, I miss seeing him everyday. Like right now I can't see my boyfriend much because I have got dancing on Tues-, Tuesdays and Wednesday and then homework for the prelims. I just need to concentrate on that. We talk on the 'phone everyday but I miss just having him around when I want him to be around. I just like miss him coming here and chatting and stuff.

Within the data, however, there were two important exceptions to this pattern of spending time together. For Franco, whose girlfriend lived in England, contact could not be negotiated into a routine. They could only meet when he had time and money to fly south to see her. Their meetings were sporadic (they had only met three or four times since forming their relationship four months prior to our interview) and each had an intensity that this enforced physical absence only amplified. Franco experienced the absence, like Julie, as painful but saw it as a temporary obstacle to

be negotiated. His plan was to move south when he left school (in just a month or so) and then establish a relationship which included the 'togetherness' he desired.

**SF:**       **So what's it like being apart?**

**Franco:** It is hard. Quite hard. I miss her, of course. But when school is over I'll be able to move there and then we can be together more. I guess we can do the things like just be together normally. Go places and do things and just spend time together without always knowing its going to end because I have to come home.

Angus faced a different difficulty. He perceived that his relationships with his former girlfriend had been placed under strain by his relationship with her brother, one of his close friends. Like most other young people, Angus spent a good deal of time at his girlfriend's house and when there he felt it was important not to exclude her brother. This led him to try to ensure that he 'split' his time between friend and girlfriend. As he explained:

**Angus:**       It was difficult. I tried to split my time between them, but it never really worked. I always felt like difficult saying to my friend that I was off to see his sister. It was like I hadn't come to see him at all or something.

In fact, Angus felt that the strain of trying to maintain the balance between these relationships was one of the reasons that he separated from his girlfriend; 'I just



couldn't get it right. I felt like I was never giving either of them the right amount of attention'.

Although Franco and Angus faced different problems with achieving the level of 'togetherness' with their girlfriends that they desired, I would argue that both their accounts reinforce the point that I am making about the significance of everyday 'togetherness' to these young people's experiences of 'serious' relationships. As I have suggested, spending time together is associated with the demonstration of continuing commitment and interest in a relationship, but also it is about the enjoyment of each other's company and developing and fulfilling a powerful need simply to 'be together' – so forcefully emphasised here by Franco. It creates a private space into which two young people enter in their relationship and, as I will go on to demonstrate, is also closely bound up with other relationship practices. The apparently rather mundane everyday activity of spending time together is the context in which and from which practices of engagement in intimate disclosure, sexual intimacy, penetrative sexual intercourse and arguing and making up emerge. Spending time together is the means by which these young people create a little private world and compose a 'story' of their relationship in which these intimacies can take place.

### *Intimate disclosure*

As I illustrated in the previous chapter, for many of the young people who participated in this study a capacity to share one's thoughts and feelings and especially one's vulnerabilities was perceived as a key component in being found attractive by a potential partner and finding them attractive. In addition, willingness

to engage in reciprocal intimate disclosure was an important part of the process of establishing their common interest and commitment to forming a 'serious' relationship. For many young people, including Julie, Franco, Stephen, Angie, Stephanie, Hayley, Angus, Doug, Lynsey and Scott, these practices continued to be important in sustaining their 'serious' relationships. They continued to share their private concerns and feelings and this contributed to their sense that the relationship was developing as they gained a deepening sense of their emotional involvement with each other. As Stephen put it when I asked him how things had changed in his relationship with his girlfriend as time progressed:

Stephen: It had got deeper and better. As we get to know more about each other and tell each other about ourselves it gets better. I think you have to have that, you know, kind of moving closer and closer together until you feel like you know that person completely.

As well as giving a relationship a sense of momentum intimate disclosure was also a means by which the members of a couple could affirm and maintain their trust in each other. This seemed to be particularly important to those young people who had been disappointed or hurt in their previous relationships. For example, for Hayley, the creation of a private social sphere of emotional interest in which both she and her boyfriend invested their 'secrets' was a means by which she felt that they demonstrated both their commitment to each other and their mutual trust. She felt confident that all the time that both she and her boyfriend privileged their relationship in this way they were reassuring each other that there was 'no-one else'.

Hayley: Nobody really spoke to me about things like this before. Like he [her boyfriend] did. It's like he really does trust me and obviously he tells me secrets and I tell him secrets. I think it makes us closer and also it makes our relationship special. We just always have each other and no one else who knows so much about us. I know he has been hurt before and that so have I and that protects us both.

However, intimate disclosure was not always only about gaining knowledge of the 'other', growing closer and maintaining trust. It was also, for some young people a means by which they could develop greater understanding of themselves. This is resonant with Anthony Giddens' assertion that relationships characterised by intimate disclosure are a 'facilitating social environment for the reflexive project of self' (Giddens, 1992:139). This seems to be what Franco is referring to when he says:

Franco: I mean, I'll tell her almost everything and, you know, like, in about a month and a half when I've been talking to her, like, it's that (.) she probably knew me better than people do here [in the school] for the past four years. You really get to understand yourself better when you share everything about you with someone else.



This increased insight into the self could also involve personal development. For Angus, engagement in intimate disclosure with his girlfriend resulted in an increase in self-confidence. As he put it, 'I am more confident. Because I've been open with (.) 'cos you've got to be open with your girlfriend'. Although, as Angus seems to be implying, intimate disclosure could be pleasurable and positive, for some young people and especially some young men, it was not easy. Like Angus, Ross and Gareth too felt that they had 'to be open' with their partners but found it difficult to articulate their feelings and felt uncomfortable about expressing themselves. As Wendy Langford (1999: 65-66) has suggested, continued engagement in intimate disclosure by men is for women an important means (although not the only means) by which they discern their continued interest in them and their commitment to their relationship. Many men respond to this, as Angus seems to be suggesting, but they can also find it difficult and may be unwilling to sustain their engagement in intense and disclosing communication of their feelings. Angie gave an account of a relationship where this seems to have been the case.

Angie: I think he found it difficult to talk about himself and his feelings sometimes. He didn't like it, didn't want to and would just say he was 'Ok' or something when I knew something was bothering him or I wanted to talk. We just, just stopped talking in the end I suppose.

According to Langford, when men cease to affirm women by engaging in intimate disclosure women can experience feelings of abandonment and resentment. They feel unable to reach men and feel a loss of validation of themselves as likeable, admired

and pleasurable to be with. Men, however, may see things differently. They may see continuing to affirm their commitment to a relationship as unnecessary or view other practices as evidence of their care and commitment. There were indications that this had been the experience of some young men in the study. As Angus explained when he described why his previous relationship had ended:

Angus: My feelings just faded to be honest. I didn't want to keep just talking, about me and us and all that stuff. I knew that she cared and she knew that I cared. To keep saying it seemed a bit, well, pointless I suppose. I don't know but I think after a while you just show someone you care rather than keeping going on about it. We just had nowhere else to go in the end I suppose.

In both Angie and Angus' accounts a decrease in intimate engagement in intimate disclosure is associated with the end of a relationship. This would seem to affirm the points made by other young people earlier about the importance of intimate disclosure as a means of sustaining relationships. In addition, the ways that their experiences may be associated with gender suggest that although heterosexual femininities and masculinities may be renegotiated in the context of 'serious' relationships this is always 'work in progress'. The power differentials between women and men against which heterosexual relationships have to be configured may re-establish themselves and men in particular may withdraw from those practices which women see as so important in affirming them and the relationship (Langford, 1999: 65-70).

### *Sex and sexual intercourse*

As I described in the previous chapter, the young people involved in this study saw themselves as situated within a little cultural world of the sixth year in which the connections between love, sex and different kinds of relationships were configured in particular ways. While relationships which focused on casual, consensual sex were permissible, and some young people such as Gareth continued to engage in them, they were regarded by many as subordinate to 'serious' relationships and associated with immaturity. Of course, sexual interaction of some kind could precede or be the basis on which a 'serious' relationship developed. Angie's current relationship, for example, had begun on the basis of 'fooling around' with her boyfriend. However, in a 'serious' relationship sex, and particularly penetrative sex, was generally understood to be an outcome of emotional intimacy and a means by which the two people involved expressed their love for each other rather than the precursor of these. This conforms with understandings found among other young people by, for example, Nicola Gavey et al. (1999) who have shown that penetrative sexual intercourse often has a special status as a means of signifying intimacy, closeness, and love within heterosexual relationships among young people.

This way of coupling of penetrative sex with intimacy, love and closeness was very evident in Stephen's description of how his relationship with his girlfriend had developed in the four months that they had been going out together.

Stephen: Erm the first, first six weeks, we were doing things that you



normally so. Go round each other's houses, and, and more of a sexual relationship towards, the two month mark...I think that we knew that we could graduate to that, we knew we could sort of (.) handle it, be more mature about it and be more sensible about it. It's just the way we are, the way both of us are, we're not exactly the most erm sexual-minded people. We don't go around just looking for a pull. So we both feel it's right because it's the way we are...We were both virgins before each other. So it's a new experience for us both. It's like a think (.) erm (.) a connection between us, it's a way of expressing our feelings and it just makes them more and more intense.

Stephen's reference to his previous virginity would seem to indicate that he is talking about penetrative sex. As such, it is reasonable to argue that, in this extract, he places particular emphasis on the difference between penetrative sex as an expression of love in the context of a 'serious' relationship and sex per se, what he terms 'just looking for a pull'. In his references to 'graduating' to a sexual relationship, to 'maturity' and being 'more sensible' he seems to be both promoting sexual intercourse as a significant act within his 'serious' relationship and also differentiating it from other sex in other contexts. I think too that this also reflects the particular significance which flows from the fact that was his first experience of penetrative sex. His reference to 'maturity' may be a way of acknowledging both the 'public' significance of first penetrative sex as a socially recognised rite of passage and drawing on this to give emphasis to the special 'private' meaning which he

attaches to sexual intercourse as an expression of emotional commitment and involvement with his girlfriend.

Other interviewees also stressed the emotional significance of penetrative sex in the context of a 'serious' relationship and, in some cases, were even more explicit in distancing it from sexual intercourse in the context of other forms of relationship. Here, for example, in an extract from our second interview, Lynsey emphasises how sexual practices and relationships can take their meanings from each other.

Lynsey: I think it is the most intimate thing that you can do with someone. You can just like get off with someone or whatever, but that's just getting off with them. You can have sex, but that's like, well, just having sex, a sexual relationship really. But you can make love too and that's different. It's more serious then. Not about sex or lust but love.

For some interviewees the distinction between 'making love' and having penetrative sex in the context of other forms of relationship were equally important but took on a particular meaning in the context of their relationship experiences. Angie, Stephanie and Hayley all described how they had sexual experiences in the context of relationships in which they now wondered if they had been mistaken in their feelings for their boyfriends and felt that these young men exploited their emotional commitment. For example, Hayley described how in one relationship which took place a year ago, she had thought that she had been in love with her boyfriend. However, he had been 'cheating' on her. As a consequence she now reflected that

although she may have been in love with him at the time, in retrospect this was clearly a mistake and she had become more cautious about establishing that 'it really was love' before having penetrative sex with a young man.

Hayley: I thought I loved him, well I did, I suppose, but he was cheating on me, so he was using my feelings for sex. I mean I wouldn't have had sex with him if I hadn't have been in love but it just makes it worse when someone uses you like that. You feel cheap and you know people are laughing at you. You know to watch your feelings more in future and to be sure that it is really love, that you really do love each other. Then sex really means something.

Hayley is alerting us here to the risks that conflating sex and love can pose for young women. It can legitimise having sex but also makes them vulnerable to being used by young men. As Hayley suggests, young men can exploit young women's feelings and commitment to a relationship in ways that damage their feelings and their reputations (Holland et al. 1998). However, this experience had not caused Hayley to lose faith in the capacity of love to transform sex into a means of emotional expression. She seems to be stressing in her concluding observation that her experiences may have in fact amplified the distinction that she draws between sex in the absence of love (or the presence of an illusionary love) and sex in the presence of love. Her commitment to privileging sex as a means of expressing love seems if anything to have been reinforced.



Not all the interviewees had had sexual intercourse, and among these young people there seemed to be an expectation that their first experience of penetrative sex would be ‘special’ and take place in the context of a ‘serious’ relationship where it would come about as a result of emotional confluence and be a natural expression of their feelings for each other. Both young men and women expressed this view. For example, in the context of talking about his expectations of future relationships Angus said:

Angus: I guess I would be looking for, you know, love now. I mean a serious relationship where we were committed to each other and really, really close. I guess that’d be emotional mostly. That’s what I’d be hoping for anyway. Everything would be based on that. Like, whatever we did, maybe like the sexual side of things would be part of that. I mean I’ve not actually had sex yet and I would want it to be part of being really in love with someone. Not just having sex.

While it could be argued that these young people’s accounts are mediated by their view of me as ‘respectable’ adult who might ‘approve’ of this particular configuration of sex and love, the emotional force and ubiquity of these views suggests that this is not so. In fact, what seems to unite these accounts of young people’s views and experiences of sexual interaction and ‘serious’ relationships is that the meanings and significance attached to sexual activity and particular penetrative sexual intercourse are being developed in tandem with views about meanings and significance of different kinds of relationships. Sex and love are being

coupled together in a particular way in the context of 'serious' relationship which gives penetrative sex meaning as an expression of love.

### *Arguments and making up*

Hayley, Shane, Doug, Angus, Stephanie, Dan, Lynsey, Angie and Julie all referred to the importance of arguing and making up with their partners as an integral aspect of 'serious' relationships. These young people's accounts tended to focus on specific occasions when either a point of disagreement or a source of irritation had been the basis for a particular severe and painful argument. Angie, for example, found herself annoyed by her boyfriend's tendency to act in ways that she saw as immature and, on one particular occasion this had resulted in what she referred to as a 'row'.

Similarly, Doug reported that a steady trickle of resentment about the time that he spent with his friends had erupted into a serious disagreement with his girlfriend.

Julie talked about having a heated argument with her boyfriend, just prior to our interviews in which he had complained about her degree of commitment to dancing and singing rather than spending time with him. Hayley, stressed about her 'prelims', had been testy and off-hand with her boyfriend, and as a consequence they had found themselves disagreeing about 'just about anything'.

Despite the different issues at stake in each of these arguments all the interviewees involved cited them as so serious that they had placed their relationship under strain, so severely in fact that in many cases they had thought that the relationship might end. In addition, they all also thought that through resolving them they had cleared the air and provided a stimulus to reflection on the value and importance of the

relationship. As a result these young people thought they had grown closer to their partner. Hayley's account, taken from our second interview, illustrates the point.

Hayley: Well, we went through a really bad patch in February.

**SF:** Did you? What happened?

Hayley: Like, arguing all the time. It was just really bad.

**SF:** Why?

Hayley: [I] don't know. I was just thinking I was so stressed out about my exams and stuff and I didn't do well in them and then, I was kind of taking it out on him, but he would be crabbit [irritable] with me and it was just really awful. And then everything just changed and we're back to normal, so it's so good again.

**SF:** Is it?

Hayley: Probably better than ever.

**SF:** How did you sort it out?

Hayley: We had to, like every time we saw each other we'd just argue, and then there was one day I thought, I can't go on like this. We sorted everything out so that's fine.

**SF:** Ok. So were you close to breaking up with him?

Hayley: Really, really close, because I was just getting sick of him and he was getting sick of me being crabbit and whatever and I was taking a lot of things out on my boyfriend and I shouldn't of, but he did the same to me and (.) but everything's fine now...we just sat there one day and had a



massive talk about it and I was like 'It's got to change or it's never going to work'. So.

**SF:**           **And you say that things have got better?**

**Hayley:**       Yeah, I think it has. I don't know what, I don't know what it is. It's just er, we've become a lot closer and talk to each other more about things, and what's bothering us. It's made things better, made us closer.

Hayley makes it very clear here that arguments, although painful and stressful, can provide an opportunity for partners in a 'serious' relationship to make explicit their commitment and investment in that relationship and in so doing their feelings for each other may be intensified. Shane shared this view about potential positive outcomes of arguments. Furthermore, although he had not yet fallen out with current girlfriend, he suggested that he regarded doing so as not only inevitable, but a means by which to counter any 'fading away' of his feelings for her. He explained this to me as he compared his current and past relationships in the context of our second interview.

**Shane:**       We've not fallen out once, we've just, it's been ongoing and normally at this stage, you (.) if (.) without an argument, without anything to make you stronger, people would just er be kind of fading away...but I don't feel that happening. I feel as if we're actually getting stronger rather than, (.) looking down.

**SF:** Do you think sometimes arguments make them stronger then?

**Shane:** Yep. (.) Sometimes an argument maybe can make people see how much they like each another and make them closer

**SF:** Make them closer? But that's not happened to you yet?

**Shane:** No. I'm not worried at all because I feel as if maybe (..) if we do start maybe fading away from each other, maybe an argument could help but at the moment we don't need an argument because we're rolling smoothly.

Other interviewees described their experiences in similar ways. They talked about arguments 'clearing the air' and 'bringing into open' the feelings that they had for, and shared with their partner. Arguing and making up seemed to represent a form of trial or test of a 'serious' relationship, a means through which the parties involved could examine and express their continuing commitment to it. The paradox contained in this practice was that by highlighting differences, disagreements and bringing the relationship into question it could shed light on and generate shared emotional needs and desires and amplify a sense of commitment and closeness between the young people involved.

### **Falling in love**

One of the reasons for describing these relationship practices in detail is that I would argue they are central to these young people's experiences of falling in love. As the data that follow illustrate, for many of these young people, their understandings of how they fell in love and what love is, were derived, at least in part, from the

meanings that they attached to these practices. Many of those features which are conventionally associated with falling in love – the sense of longing for and idealisation of the ‘other’, the transformation of the self, and feelings of intense intimacy and emotional and erotic pleasure – are at some level both embedded in and realised through these relationship practices (Averill, 1985; Jackson, 1993).

In Hayley’s account of her experience of falling in love, for example, she describes how her feelings ‘built up’ as she grew closer to her boyfriend. What seems significant here is that she falls in love when she realises how much he has invested in her. It is his trust, affection and care that reveal to her the depth of her own feelings. Furthermore, she appears to know about his investments primarily through their engagement in intimate disclosure. It is ‘all the things that he said to me and had said to him’ that gave her access to her boyfriend’s feelings and gave rise to her own.

Hayley: I knew I liked him, but it took a while to build up, and then just, they still build up every single day I see him.

SF: And you said there was a moment when you fell in love?

Hayley: It was just ((clears throat)) one day the way I found it, erm, (.) I saw the way he treated me and stuff. All the things that he said to me and I had said to him. It just showed that he really cared for me and trusted me and made me feel special. I thought this is just amazing, I just really have fallen for this guy really badly. I knew how he felt and he knew how I felt, it was just a ‘wow’ moment.



Other interviewees' experiences of falling love contained similar themes. Stephen, for example, also talked about his sense of being nurtured and cared for. He described this using the metaphor of a gardener tending a plant.

Stephen: She's sort of watered me up so I've just sprouted up. She's grown me, that's what she, she's been the gardener and I'm just the shrub. She looked after me and made me grow and I so fell in love.

He went on to talk about the part that both physical intimacy and a sense of being 'totally known' by his girlfriend had played in the development of his feelings of falling in love.

Stephen: We can always talk to each other about anything em and I feel totally known by her in every way...and the best thing is we can just lie and be with each other, I suppose that's the thing I absolutely love, I love just being there and sort of holding her, that the love, that's when the love just came over me. I'm just lying there with her and feeling her heartbeat and hearing her breathing.

The idea that falling in love was connected in some way to a realisation of one's sense of dependency on the 'other' that Stephen seems to be referring to in his 'gardener and shrub' metaphor, was also evident in Lynsey's account. For her this was simultaneously a source of a sense of power and vulnerability. She talked about

how she felt made ‘whole’ by her boyfriend, validated by his feelings for her but also how this amplified her sense of the potential costs of losing him. Falling in love was connected with recognising these feelings.

Lynsey: It was just when I realised how much I needed him. He made me feel whole, like a complete person. Without him I thought I’d be just back to being half a person. I couldn’t bear the idea of him not being there. It was all the things we’d done together, and feeling like he knew me totally as a person. That he cared about me and was always showing it through the things he said and did. It just made me who I am.

Although these young people each emphasise slightly different aspects of their emotional experience as contributing to their realisation that they had fallen in love, it seems to me that they all point towards the importance of the kinds of practices – asking out; spending time together; penetrative sex; and arguing and making up – which I have been describing in this chapter. The young people indexed these practices in their descriptions of falling in love. The practices provided the meanings by which they explained how love comes into being and what it involves.

### *Declarations of love*

However, falling in love was not simply a process of realising one’s own feelings for one’s partner. It was also a matter of declaring them and, crucially, having them reciprocated. For these young people, unrequited and unreciprocated love was seen as illusionary. The absence of confluence between their feelings and those of their

partners brought their own feelings into doubt. It was a necessity in order to fully fall in love to know that the part of the self which was so invested in the other was matched by that part of the other which was invested in the self. As a consequence, declaring that one had fallen in love was an essential, but a massively anxiety-provoking experience for these young people.

Hayley explained that her realisation that she loved her boyfriend demanded that she should tell him this. However, she hesitated to do so: '[I] Just kept quiet. I thought I, I can't do this'. It would seem that Hayley was concerned that by declaring her love she would 'ruin everything', that her boyfriend would feel overwhelmed and under pressure to reciprocate her feelings. These were common concerns. As Stephen explained:

Stephen: I just thought, you know, 'Wow, she's exactly like me, we're the same, we both like the same things, both do the same things' erm and about a month after, a month into our relationship I said I loved her, and I was shitting myself. I was absolutely shitting myself. But luckily she said 'I love you' back, just really good and I was relieved erm.

SF: Was that always worrying you?

Stephen: Well, sort of worried I'd been moving too fast in a sense erm, and that maybe if she didn't love me it meant I couldn't be in love with her. I just said to her 'I can't help my feelings, but I do love you' and she said 'I love you too.'



Here Stephen emphasises the anxiety he felt about declaring his feelings and his relief when they were reciprocated. He makes it explicit that for him his love for his girlfriend was dependent on its recognition by her. Without this, his own might be unreal, a mistake or an illusion.

One of the distinctive features of these accounts is the confidence they display that the young people involved had indeed fallen in love. In contrast Angus, like Dan was plagued with doubts about whether or not he had fallen in love. As he put it:

Angus: Well (...) I'm interested to know myself what (.) what love (.) well, what other people would say falling in love is, I mean (..) You do the whole stereotype that it's the warm fuzzy feeling in your stomach, but (.) I don't know I. I don't know if I've ever fallen in love, I mean (...) I, I had a, I had a girlfriend for a year and three months but I don't (.) I, I thought it was sometimes I did think that I thought I was falling in love, but other times (.) I think I wasn't. Just the times when we, we just had like (..) I dunno, we just talked and we just, we just laughed together or kind (.) of really interacted well and kind of just went and had, like, a really good time but (.) and that's probably the times that I thought, well, well once she'd like she'd gone home or whatever I'd gone home and then I, I'd really like kind of reflect on (.) what had happened and I'd be, like 'Yeah that's (...)' that's probably the time that I (.) thought I had fallen in love with her.

The question he raises, about ‘what other people would say falling in love is’ seems extremely pertinent here. Angus suggests that if only he knew what falling love felt like he could make a proper evaluation of his experiences. Of course this flies in the face of one the principal conventions about love. As Stevi Jackson has observed, love is ‘in essence indefinable, mysterious, outside rational discourse. Its meaning is held to be knowable only intuitively, at the level of feeling, and cannot be communicated in precise terms’ (Jackson, 1993: 207). As a consequence, according to this convention, one can only know love through its experience. As Doug commented, summarising a view prevalent among the interviewees, ‘Love. Well, either you are or you’re aren’t. There’s no halfway house and you can’t make it happen. It’s not something you can explain, but you know soon enough when it happens to you though’. This view clearly privileges both love and also lovers. It preserves love’s mystery and helps to ensure its enduring significance as a mode of relating to and ‘knowing’ both the self and others. It gives lovers access to knowledge which is not available to those who have not experienced love. However, as Angus suggests, it is also deeply unsatisfying. If knowing that one had fallen in love is based, at least in part, on the meanings one can gather from engagement in social practices associated with caring, sharing and physical and emotional intimacy it ought, at least in part, to be a communicable experience insofar as these practices can be described. In fact, there was some evidence in the interviews that young people actively engaged in the processes which both sought to relate the experience of falling in love to relationship practices and simultaneously to project some part beyond them. The clearest illustration of this arose in my second interview with Shane. He described to me the content of some conversations that he had been having with his girlfriend.

Shane: Well, we've talked to her about it [falling in love], just but (.) 'cos she's kinda a wee bit younger, she's never (.) she's told me that she's never felt love before but (.) she's just asking me all these questions about how you feel and 'How do you know?' and, 'How long does, should it take?' and, just things like that.

**SF:** And what do you tell her?

Shane: Just tell her, it's an indescribable feeling when you fall in love, but you can't make it happen (.) it just takes (.) limit-, limitless time (.) to fall in love, it can happen instantly, it can happen over time, kinda thing. It all depends on how much you show that you care for each other.

What Shane seems to be suggesting is that young people can learn about love from each other. Although he emphasises that it is unpredictable and connected to relational practices he is, in providing this account to his girlfriend, 'educating' her expectations about love. The connection between falling in love and wider social resources was also mentioned by Franco. In fact, he was more explicit than Shane in suggesting that not only one's own experiences of relationships but also one's experiences of relationships within the family and the opportunities and constraints represented by age and social context could influence expectations and experiences of love.



Franco: Of course I think that falling in love comes from the way that you are together in a relationship. But you also kind of know about falling in love from your own experiences, but there's also what you see. The ways that people in your family love each other and how they feel. I also think it depends on lots of things. I mean maybe when you're younger you can't really fall in love. For me, being younger was all about being 'the man', you know, not feelings so much. Maybe now some people can't or won't. I mean it could be bad time and like now, knowing you're leaving home and going away might mean that you're just kinda not ready.

In a sense these few words capture all the themes that have I sought to explore in the chapter. Here is the emphasis on the practices through which 'serious' relationships are enacted as the means by which feelings are expressed, understood and given significance, for example when Franco talks about 'the way that you are together'. Here too is acknowledgement that these meanings may be elaborated or (re)configured in relation to other resources which are available to young people. These include the 'family', indicated here when Franco talks about 'the ways that people in your family love each other'; understandings of gender and gender differences – 'being younger was all about being 'the man'; and the ways that transitions can frame what is 'feelable' – 'knowing you're leaving home and going away might mean that you're kinda just not ready'.

## **Summary and conclusions**

In this chapter I have continued the work I began in Chapter Four where I explored how young people define 'serious' relationships by giving a detailed description of young people's experiences of these relationships. I have described some of everyday dimensions of 'doing' a 'serious' relationship and explored in depth young people's accounts of engagement in intimate disclosure, penetrative sex and arguing and making up; selecting these as my focus because they emerged through young people's accounts as especially meaningful in terms of their emotional experiences of their 'serious' relationships and falling in love.

Although I have focused on describing the composition and enactment of 'serious' relationships from 'within' I have also argued that there are indications in these accounts of some of the other resources on which young people draw to understand and give meaning to their experiences. For example, I have suggested that in their accounts of engaging in intimate disclosure many of these young people seem to be drawing on their understandings of the ways that gender relations and differences are patterned within heterosexuality and exploring new ways of enacting and experiencing their heterosexual masculinities and femininities in relation to these. There are also indications that experiences of family life are influential on young people's expectations of their 'serious' relationships, the ways that they conduct them and their understandings of their emotional experiences within these relationships. Finally, there are moments in the data presented in this chapter when transitions seem significant. The prospect of leaving school, for example, provides a context in which some young people frame their 'serious' relationships and understand the range of emotions that are 'feelable' within them.

This provides the basis for the analytical work which I will undertake in the following three chapters, focusing in turn on the ways that these aspects of the social context in which these young people enact their ‘serious’ relationships can be seen to be shaping and giving meaning to their experiences.



## **Chapter Six: 'Doing 'serious' relationships and making gender'**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I aim to explore the ways that young people's views and beliefs about gender and gender differences were influencing their experiences of 'serious' relationships. It is apparent from the data that I have already presented in this thesis that these views and beliefs were important and that the ways that young people understood gender and especially differences between femininity and masculinity influenced the meanings that they attached to their actions, their feelings and the ways that they understood the actions and feelings of their partners. For example, as I showed in Chapter Four, in the context of forming 'serious' relationships young women like Angie and Hayley took on a particular role in relation to facilitating young men's engagement in talking about themselves, and especially in enabling them to express their concerns and vulnerabilities. I argued that these young women adopted these roles partly because they perceived differences in young women's and men's willingness, capacity and interest in engaging in talking about personal issues and especially sharing their feelings. They saw young men as reticent to share their concerns and feelings and felt that they, as young women, needed to take the lead in creating conditions under which young men could 'open up'. They understood that by 'opening up' young men were signalling their interest and commitment to forming a 'serious' relationship.

However, the data generated through the interviews went much further than providing examples of the ways that young people's perceptions of gender and gender difference were influencing the enactment and understandings of 'serious'

relationships. The issue of gender and particularly perceptions of the differences in the ways that young women and men thought about and approached 'serious' relationships was also discussed explicitly by young people. For example, Lynsey, Stephanie, Shane, Doug, Stephen, Gareth and Angus and the young people involved in all three small group discussions talked to me at some point about their views on gender, love and relationships. Through this talk it is possible to begin to access some of the discourses about masculinity and femininity, emotions and relationships which represented the background against which their experiences of 'serious' relationships took place. As I will show, since they are firmly embedded in the wider culture, these discourses were in many ways recognisable. However, the comments of these young people suggest that they were inflected by the particularities of the little cultural world represented by the peer group within the sixth year.

Perhaps surprisingly, some young people also talked about how their experiences of 'serious' relationships had led to shifts in their ideas about gender and gender differences. As I will detail later in this chapter, Lynsey, for example, referred to some of the ways that being involved in a 'serious' relationship gave her insight to what she termed 'the things that men really think about'. Furthermore, some of these young people were explicit about how their experiences of 'serious' relationships had provided them with ways of understanding their own gendered identities. As Stephen said, for instance, being in a relationship with his girlfriend had helped to make him 'a new man', by which he meant that he had achieved access to aspects of his masculinity which he had not discerned previously. As I will demonstrate, one effect of this was that, for these young people, 'serious' relationships represented a context

in which their ideas about heterosexual femininity and masculinity could be renegotiated.

In exploring these issues I will organise this chapter around two questions. First, what similarities and differences did these young people perceive in young women's and men's approaches to, interests and investments in, and understanding of 'serious' relationships? And, second, how did these perceptions and understandings affect their own experiences of being in a 'serious' relationship? At the end of the chapter I will examine how the revised understandings that these young people reached about gender through their 'serious' relationships gave them new insights into how gender was being enacted and produced in the wider context of their relationships with peers and friends and enabled them to take up new positions in relation to these enactments.

### **Young people, gender, love and relationships**

As I have shown in the first two chapters of this thesis the sociological study of emotions draws attention to the ways that love is bound up with the (re)production of historically and culturally specific forms of heterosexual masculine and feminine identities. In my review of this literature I suggested that, because of the multiple and competing ways of 'doing' love and relationships available to them in contemporary, western societies, young people find themselves in a complex environment (Allen, 2004). They can, for example, draw on the classical romantic narrative as a way of enacting and understanding their experiences of love and relationships. Alternatively, or even simultaneously, they can refer to the emergent democratic forms of relationship. Each of these 'scripts' makes available quite



different opportunities for constructing ideas about gender and gender differences.

For example, the 'romantic' script emphasises the antithetical aspects of masculinity and femininity, typically positioning women as passive, shy, emotional, insecure and lacking confidence and men as active, assured, emotionally cool and confident (Christian-Smith, 1990). It has in fact been argued that the construction of femininity and masculinity as oppositional is a crucial element of this narrative laying the ground for both women and men to experience transformation in their identities which allow them to come together through love (Stacey and Pearce, 1995: 16-17). In contrast, for Anthony Giddens, democratic, 'confluent' forms of relationship do not polarise gender differences in this way. These relationships place the emphasis not on the differences between femininity and masculinity but on the equality and shared interests of women and men as they come together in mutual and reciprocal emotional investment. In these relationships it is not gender that matters, but 'the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to the other' (Giddens, 1992: 62).

However, although it seems likely that, via these various scripts, young people can potentially construct gender in new and different ways, it was also evident from the literature that within this emergent culture some of the imperatives associated with 'older' discourses about gender, love and relationships are still potent (Henderson et al., 2007: 147; Holland et al., 1998: 104-105). As I suggested in Chapter Two, one of the most powerful of these is the discourse constructing the public 'truths' of young men's interest in sex and young women's interest in love. As Janet Holland et al. (1998) demonstrate, these 'truths' can be renegotiated in the 'private' realm of the relationship where young women are able to find a means to express desire and men

to show their emotional vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, it remains the case that these processes always take place in relation to the convention that young men want sex and young women want love and are thereby contained within the powerful and resilient 'gendered languages of heterosexuality' (Holland et al. 1998:101).

The literature also suggested that there were other aspects of heterosexual relationships through which 'older' ideas about gender also asserted themselves. For example, it has been noted that women and men have different expectations about the extent to which they will talk about themselves, their feelings for each other and about their relationship. In general, research suggests that women and men attach different degrees of importance to engagement in talk of this kind. Women see it as a way of maintaining a relationship and male reciprocation as validating and a confirmation of their interest, care and commitment to them and to the relationship. Men, it has been suggested, see such talk as a necessary step in forming a relationship but thereafter may not be willing or able to continue to disclose in this way, seeing their interest and commitment as being expressed in other ways. They may even find women's attempts to draw them into expressing their feelings intrusive, unreasonable and threatening (Langford, 1999: 67-70; Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; Mansfield and Collard, 1988). These gendered differences in expectations and behaviour around the expression of feelings are connected to wider discourses about emotion which constitute attitudes towards the management and expression of feelings in relation to the maintenance of masculine and feminine spheres or influence and power (Lutz, 1996: 73-76).

Finally, it is important to note that the literature demonstrated that other factors also influence the ways young people understand gender and gender difference. Their family backgrounds, class and ethnicity are all important in mediating their understandings of what relationships comprise and how gender may be configured in relation to them (Holland et al., 1998; Henderson et al., 2007; Pagano and Hirsch, 2007; Hey, 1997).

### **Young women's and men's expectations of 'serious' relationships: Coming to the same end from different starting places**

In both the individual interviews and small group discussions young people tended to focus primarily on the similarities in young women's and men's expectations of 'serious' relationships. As Ross put it in our first interview:

Ross: I think men and women want the same thing at the end of day.  
A relationship where they can trust each other and love each other and be close, I mean that's what you look for.

Hayley shared this view. When I asked her, in our second interview, what she thought young people looked for in a 'serious' relationship she explicitly focused on the similarities in young women's and men's views.

Hayley: Young people look for commitment and trust and, er, to find someone who they can really talk to. I think it's the same whether you're a girl or a boy, it's that you're wanting someone special and who makes you feel special.



However, many of these young people also believed that fulfilling these shared expectations involved what Angie termed understanding and responding to the fact that young women and men were 'coming from different places'. Both the idea of shared expectations of 'serious' relationships and that of young women and men coming from different places was expressed very clearly within the largest, mixed sex group discussion.

Helen: The thing is that we all want to be in relationships that are, well, relationships where you're serious about each other. That's the same for everyone.

Andrew: Yeah, but it's not like what you want, it's how you get there too.

SF: What do you mean? How you get there?

Andrew: Well, I suppose (.) What I'm trying to say is that women and men, it's different for women and men. They've kind of got to see it from different perspectives even though they want the same thing at the end of the day

Helen: [Ye]ah. I think that's right. For women you've got to trust a guy, really trust him and for men maybe it matters but it's not so important.

Andrew: It is too. I mean it's just a stereotype that men don't care so much. I mean maybe they don't show it and they find out if they can trust a woman a different way but it matters. They

don't like gossip to everyone about him to see what he's been up to.

Shirley: Now who's stereotyping!

Here Angie's proposition about the differences in the gendered positions that a young woman and man come from as they work towards a 'serious' relationship is clearly endorsed by other young people who participated in this group discussion.

Elaborating her point, these young people identify that young women and men attach different significance to and seek to establish trust in other in different ways.

However, much more is going on in this group discussion. In particular, the extract illustrates how talk about gender differences among young people becomes in itself a potential site for contestation between young women and men and the creation and negotiation of their understandings of gender. This is important because it alerts us to the fact that gender is present and being actively made and negotiated in the context of this research. Even when young people are talking about it in abstract or impersonal terms they are speaking from and in relation to gendered positions and understand other young people's views in relation to the positions that these create.

Although group discussions provide an environment in which making gender in this way is often particularly evident, I would argue that it also the case that individual interviews are a context in which gender is enacted and negotiated as it is spoken about (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999: 18; Vaughn et al., 1996: 62-63).

Acknowledging this makes interpreting accounts more complex but, as the extract above demonstrates, it also provides insight into how gender difference is experienced and understood outside the context of research interventions. This is because the processes of negotiation taking place within the research context

necessarily relate to a social world that is beyond it. (Hollander, 2004). What this extract demonstrates then is that, while gender is only accessible through interactions which are themselves sites for its (re)negotiation, these interactions nevertheless highlight aspects of the background against which they take place. The point has been well made by Stephen Frosh et al. (2002: 32) who have shown in their research with boys and young men that, while it is essential to see talk about gender as a socially situated performance which is itself shaped by the immediate demands of the context in which it takes place, the shifting positions which people take up in order to manage these contexts expose both the different positions which they take up in other contexts and the dominant discourses which they are deploying, modifying or resisting.

With these arguments in mind, I now want to examine what young people perceived to be some of the main dimensions of difference in terms of where young women and men were 'coming from' as they worked towards 'serious' relationships. There were three main themes within these data relating to sex and love, commitment and independence and expressing emotions.

### *Sex and love*

There was evidence in the interview data that there was a general tendency for these young people to see that one important area of potential difference between where young men and women were 'coming from' related to how they configured the relationship between sex and love. This issue was referred to by Doug, Lynsey, Stephen, Scott, Hayley, Gareth, and all the young people who took part in group



discussions. For example, in the context of our second interview, as we spoke about Doug's perceptions of how men and women approached relationships, he said:

Doug: Of course women want love. Men do too, but you know it's got to come first for the lasses. They like to feel emotionally erm, involved. For guys that comes but not always at the same time. Also you don't need to be in love to enjoy a relationship. You know, you can enjoy just, like, the company and the physical aspects too.

Lynsey, speaking in our first interview, seemed to endorse this view.

Lynsey: I do think there's some truth in the fact that men are more happy with looking for sex from a relationship than women. I mean that's fine for them. For a woman it's kind of dodgy to be thinking about the physical part of a relationship. The emotional part definitely has to come first.

As Janet Holland et al. (1998: 90) have argued this configuration of the relationship between sex and love and masculinity and femininity is partly derived from the power of the male peer group. This, they argue, patrols and defines gendered heterosexual identities via its regulation of young women's and men's talk about sex and sexuality. A frequent condition of entry to the male peer group, they suggest, is that young men express knowledge and interest in sex and reject emotional commitment to women as a threat to their independence. Needless to say, this

constructs polarised views of male and female fields of interest in relationships and makes young women vulnerable to having their sexual reputations constructed around these oppositions. As Holland et al. observe the effects of the male peer group may be especially powerful in their domination of sexual language and construction of sexual reputations around the time when young people are losing their virginity. Young men, Holland et al. (1998: 90) argue, appropriate sex and sexual conquest as means of establishing status among themselves. For young men, sex and sexual conquest and the objectification of women becomes a way of ensuring eligibility to the male group and asserting themselves as 'not girl and not gay' (see also, Biddle and Forrest, 1997). Although I did not systematically collect data on the sexual histories and behaviour of the young people involved in this study, Holland's et al. argument may have particular relevance to the sample of young people involved in this study given that there is evidence in some of the interviews that some of them were losing their virginities around the time that the interviews took place. (It should be noted that data collected from large scale studies of young Scottish people's sexual attitudes and lifestyles suggest that this sample was around the median age for first sexual intercourse (Wight and Henderson, 2004).

In addition, some interviewees, including Scott, Stephen, Gareth, Lynsey, Angie, Ross and Dan seemed to confirm the point made by Holland et al. about the power of the male peer group to influence views about gender, sex and love. As this extract from my second interview with Scott suggests, although he sought to distance himself from it, the male peer group was indeed perceived as an influential force in shaping attitudes to sex and gender among the sixth year. As we talked about his perceptions of the various social groups within the sixth year he explained that:

**Scott:** There are lads, you know, who just talk about women and who they've 'had' and what they've got up to. I don't like it. It feels really immature to me. They're just trying to make themselves look big and they think it's funny but it's not. It's just talk. It's sexist and pretty, well, stupid. You expect it of people when they're younger but I think we should be leaving behind by now. I think you look more mature by being respectful towards people actually.

**SF:** So does anyone take any notice of them then?

**Scott:** Well, I suppose so. I mean I think people think it's immature, but they also kind of take notice of it. You have to be careful what you say otherwise you can become the butt of their jokes. That's why I don't talk about my relationship in school.

Importantly, as well as emphasising his distance from this group, Scott stresses his identification with alternative means of asserting his masculinity, specifically via a rejection of the values of the peer group and being 'respectful' towards other people. However, he is clearly conversant with the purposes to which this group is putting discourses about sex and sexuality and also acknowledges that it does affect his and other young people's behaviour to the extent that they are 'careful' about what they say about themselves and their relationships. This seems consonant with Lynsey's comments, reported above, about how it can be 'dodgy' for a young woman to suggest her interests do not conform to the dominant discourse of gendered interests being propounded by this group. The implication is that if young women in this



particular peer group suggest an investment or interest in sex rather than love, they are at risk of having their reputations attacked through the discourses which the male group deploy.

What this suggests then, is that part of the gender culture in relation to which these young people formed their 'serious' relationships was still, in important ways, configured around the power residing in male groups to enforce adherence to a view that men were interested in sex and women in love. However, as Scott's comments suggest, this power was not uncontested. This is an extremely important point. As I will show throughout this chapter, there were in fact several competing gender cultures among this group of young people and interviewees moved between these, in the process occupying a variety of positions on gender and gender difference.

### *Commitment and independence*

Young people's comments about the ways commitment and independence in relationships were associated with gender differences can be seen as linked to the discursive construction of the relations between love and sex which I have just described. This was an issue mentioned by Gareth, Doug, Stephen, Lynsey, Hayley and by Honore and Hazel. The idea that women seek commitment in relationships and men seek to resist this and to maintain their independence can be seen as flowing from the idea that women are invested in love and men in sex. This linkage was evident in Hazel's and Honore's comments made during the course of a discussion about managing the breakdown of relationships.

Hazel: It's hard when a relationship ends but sometimes it's for the best. You know, it can't go on, you want different things, so you just need to part ways.

SF: What kinds of different things do you want then?

Honore: I think usually it's that women want more than men.

Hazel: But that's true from the start too. Usually women want more commitment and get involved sooner, I mean involved emotionally sooner than men.

SF: You mean that, that women look for that commitment?  
What about men?

Hazel: They're more worried about their independence. They want to make sure that they're still free to do their own thing.

Honore: [Y]eah. They enjoy the relationship but it's, it's just not as big a part of their lives to them as it for a girl. You know they worry that she'll put pressure on them to be committed. They might want to after a while, but for women commitment's from the start.

Hazel: For guys it might not come along 'til later. They'll probably be thinking about sex before they think about the commitment.  
I've known that.

Honore: Thinking about it once every three seconds ((laughter)).

While Honore makes a joke about the priority that young men attach to sex rather than commitment in their relationships with young women, in doing so she emphasises her perception of the quite different perspectives and interests that she

sees young women and men bringing to a relationship. The same theme around gender differences in perceptions of commitment was identified by at least one of the young men, Gareth. However, he articulated a quite different argument to validate male interests in maintaining freedom.

Gareth: Women and men see it differently. I don't think men mind being in a relationship at all, that's not it. But it has to have limits. It can't take over everything. You've got to have your time with your mates for example. I think sometimes women don't understand if you were just in the relationship totally so to speak, you won't be yourself. I think it shows commitment to let the other person be themselves actually.

What Gareth seems to be suggesting is not that men are 'commitment phobic' but that they see it as reasonable to demand freedoms within a heterosexual relationship – specifically, the freedom to associate with their 'mates'. He argues that this freedom is bound up with commitment because a willingness to allow one's partner to exercise freedom is itself a sign of commitment to that individual. Unlike Honore and Hazel, Gareth does not refer directly to male investment in sex and female investment in love as orienting this view. However, it may well be implicit within it not least because one of the things that 'mates' may give access to is a masculine identity which is configured around this discourse.



### *Expressing emotions*

The third important area identified by interviewees as indicating a difference in where young men and women were 'coming from' related to the capacity and willingness to express emotion. Lynsey, Hayley, Angie, Stephanie, Stephen, Shane and Doug all mentioned this. Stephanie expressed the general view succinctly:

Stephanie: It's much harder for men to talk about their feelings. I don't know why, but it's true. They just don't seem to know what they feel sometimes. Women can talk about their feelings really easily.

Young men generally shared this view although some, like Doug and Stephen felt that it was highly dependent on to whom they were talking whether or not they could discuss their feelings. Nonetheless, they like Shane felt that men spoke less often and with less confidence about feelings than women. In fact, in the following extract Shane goes even further than Stephanie elaborating on what he thinks lies behind these gender differences.

Shane: Boys, lots of boys don't know how to say what they feel, you ken [know]. Maybe no-one has spoken to them about feelings before and they're sort of shy of it. I think if you do it, it gets easier. You kinda get used to thinking what to say. But most men, they find it hard. They maybe go and kick a ball about or something rather than speak about it. If it's bad they kick the

shit out it, if it's a good feeling they just want to blow off the energy.

As this suggests, Shane's perception was that, although young men have the capacity to talk about their feelings, they are unpractised and deterred by insecurities about the implications of expressing themselves. From Shane's point of view, men tend to displace and 'act out' their feelings rather than articulate them.

The young people's perception that attitudes to sex and love; independence and commitment; and emotional reticence and emotional expression divided along gender lines suggest the presence of these as 'public truths' which they had to negotiate in order to reach their shared goal of a mutual and reciprocal engagement in a 'serious' relationship. Through these 'truths' femininity and masculinity are conceptualised as at best complementary. More often, however, they are seen as oppositional identities. Men are, from this point of view, invested in sex; women in love. They seek independence whereas women seek commitment and they are reticent in expressing feelings whereas women are at ease with emotional expression. However, as I have tried to illustrate, if such views provided a taken for granted background to the relationships of the young men and women in the sample, they were also understood by the young people in complex ways. Ideas of gender difference clearly had meaning and resonance for these young people and they oriented themselves in relation to them. Nevertheless, it was equally obvious that such ideas were coming under pressure. If the power of the male peer group was still felt, it was also contested by alternative masculinities which found status not through sex and sexualising young women but through 'respect'.

Having established that this is where young people 'come from' in terms of gendered positions to their engagement in 'serious' relationships I now want to turn to my second question: How do these perceptions and understandings affect their experiences of being in a 'serious' relationship?

### **Doing serious relationships making gender**

In this section of the chapter I will focus on two themes which emerged particularly strongly through the interview data. First, I will explore the ways in which the young people felt their views about gender and gender difference were altered through the experience of their 'serious' relationships. In so doing, I will describe how the young women came to gain new insights in what Lynsey termed 'the things that men really think about' and how the young men gained insights into what Dan called, 'the other side of women'. Subsequently I will examine how some young women found their experiences of 'serious' relationship a context in which they could renegotiate their understandings of the links between femininity and commitment.

Both of these issues configure around the idea of the transformation of the self that takes places through the reciprocal emotional and physical intimacy and investment involved in entering into a 'serious' relationship. As Wendy Langford has pointed out, for women this transformation often involves becoming 'women who do could anything' (Langford, 1999: 50). For men this involves becoming 'men who are not men' that is, from women's perspective, not 'self-centred, indifferent and emotionally distant' but 'loving, devoted and emotional' (Langford, 1999: 53).



It is possible to see congruency between these ideas about the transformation of femininity and masculinity and Holland's et al. (1998) concept of the 'private truths' to which heterosexual relationships allow young people access. As Holland et al. argue it is in the 'private' sphere of the couple that the 'public' truths about gender, sex, love and relationships can be resisted and reworked and that women can become powerful and express desire and men can show their vulnerabilities and express their feelings (Holland et al., 1998: 100).

It is important to note, however, that in both Langford's (1999) and Holland's et al. (1998) analyses these new ways of conceptualising gender are always seen to take place against the background of hegemonic masculinity. For Langford this is reflected in the fact that the transformations experienced by the women who participated in her study had a contradictory logic. The women were empowered by their relationships with men but only through the recognition that men granted to them. In Holland's et al. analysis the private sphere of interest represented by the relationship of the heterosexual couple is configured in relation to this same hegemonic source of power in the public realm.

In Chapters Four and Five I identified the importance of engagement in intimate disclosure about the self in both the formation and maintenance of young people's 'serious' relationships. What I want to elaborate here is how these practices can involve young people in the renegotiation of their ideas about gender. The argument I am trying to progress by so doing is that these new insights take place in relation to the kinds of discourses which I identified in the first section of this chapter. Although there are radical reworkings taking place here they are as Janet Holland et al have

observed, 'being created from traditional materials' and in ways that 'place young people within identities and commitments that can contain their resistance' (Holland et al., 1998:104-105).

As I showed in Chapters Four and Five one of the distinctive features of young women's accounts of engaging young men in intimate disclosure was that through this practice they perceived that young men 'opened up' to them. In Lynsey's case she thought that this gave her access to insights about young men's feelings and concerns that challenged some the 'public truths' about masculinity. In our second interview together we revisited the issue of why she felt so strongly towards her boyfriend. In the course of this discussion she said:

Lynsey: One thing is how much it shocked me to realise what men were really like. I saw the real things that men think about. That really opened my eyes. Before I had always sort of accepted that they were a, well, basically a bit shallow and immature really. They always seemed not to take anything seriously. I realised with my boyfriend that maybe they weren't like that, underneath. He was so sensitive and caring.

When I asked her how this made her feel it became apparent, that like the women in Langford's study, Lynsey felt validated, attractive and desired, and also more powerful through the recognition that this gave her.

SF: You were surprised then? To find this?

Lynsey: [Ye]eah. yes. I mean you don't see it normally. Guys just seem sort of closed off and basically like putting their feelings to one side. It made me feel so good. To know that he could be like that with me. It was special to us. It made me feel like I was special and, and wanted. It also encouraged me, to be myself more. To just go for things that I wanted because I felt that he believed in me.

These processes of revelation about self and 'other' and about femininity and masculinity were partially mirrored in the accounts of young men. Some young men focused on issues such as beginning to understand young women's anxieties about trust and commitment. Shane, for example, was clear that through his 'serious' relationships he had come to see that young women 'can feel really careful about men, about trusting them, because they can be hurt when men take advantage of that'. For Stephen, his relationship with his girlfriend had enabled him to understand that young women could experience sexual desire and passion as strongly as young men. As he put it, 'She, not to be too crude, is really horny sometimes and I never really thought about women being so strong with their sexual desires'.

While this suggests that, as with the young women in the study, the young men's experience of intimate relationships sometimes challenged their ideas about gender, their accounts also indicate that renegotiations of this kind were underpinned by the power inherent in heterosexual masculinities. Doug's account of the insights he gained into femininity through his relationship with his girlfriend were particularly illuminating on this score. Talking in our first interview about how his relationship



with his girlfriend had changed his views about women as he got to know his girlfriend better, he said:

Doug: I'm a man's man I suppose. I like the banter and that. I suppose when we got together I was basically attracted to her as a woman who was pretty and funny. When we'd been going out for a wee while I suppose I realised that she was like me really. A sort of female version. She can be serious and has a woman's perspective but she also likes a laugh.

SF: (.) A woman's perspective?

Doug: What I mean is (.) that she might put that bit of her up front, the feminine bit sometimes and be serious and kind of emotional; but then she can also be funny and hold her own. Oh, never banter with her, I've never had the last word. She's definitely got more confident like that since we've been together. All round really. I really saw another side of her to the one I'd saw in school.

Here Doug seems to be suggesting that he expected to find his girlfriend in possession of a set of 'feminine' characteristics: for instance, that she would be 'serious' and 'emotional'. However, as he got to know her, it would seem he realised that these provided only one aspect of his girlfriend's identity. In particular, her ability to engage in 'banter' seems to have challenged Doug's ideas about femininity. To his apparent surprise, his girlfriend was both less serious and more combative than he had imagined. While such revelations are of a piece with previous examples

in which the young people concerned seem to have been renegotiating their understandings of gender and sexuality, what is surely significant about Doug's account is his perception that it is the relationship itself which has enabled his girlfriend to become 'more confident'. Picking up on this I asked him to expand on the point. He replied:

Doug: I love it, her being like more confident. She knows what she wants. It makes her more attractive to me to see her realising her talents and trying to be the best she can. Like her art, she needs someone to tell her how good she is, she really is. I really admire her for it.

Without impugning the sincerity of Doug's admiration and his assertion that his girlfriend is more attractive to him because she is 'trying to be the best she can', I think the way that his account is oriented around an unspoken male power and authority to grant women access to these alternative forms of femininity cannot be ignored. In fact, although I think it is most explicit here, I would argue that this alerts us to the ways that it may also be relevant to understanding other young people's experiences, including those of Lynsey, Shane and Stephen. What seems to be happening is that, while these young people's ideas about femininity and masculinity were undoubtedly transformed within their relationships, these transformations took place in relation to male power. For instance, in Lynsey's account, it is implied, it is she who creates the conditions under which her boyfriend can begin to renegotiate his masculinity by sharing his concerns and caring for her. This represents a tacit acknowledgement that men 'open out' through choice, and on their terms. It is not

for women to demand it, but to invite it. This latent male power residing into heterosexual masculinity is even more apparent in Doug's comments. For all his genuine delight in his girlfriend, it remains the case that Doug attributes her confidence and success to his own ability to, as it were, bring her out of herself.

If this seems a rather gloomy conclusion to draw about the potential of serious relationships to provide a forum in which young people are able to renegotiate their relations to gender and sexuality, then the last examples I want to explore suggest that young people may sometimes be able to draw on resources that actively challenge male hegemony. For example, Angie spoke to me about a relationship which had recently ended. She had been heavily emotionally committed to this relationship and, at the time, had begun to plan further ahead and try to imagine what the future would be. As she explains, her feeling that she might want to preserve the relationship was in tension with her other ambitions and this led her to think about how she constituted her femininity.

Angie: I was in love...and committed to the relationship but I realised that that didn't mean I had to give everything up for it. It was hard to explain, but I suppose partly because we were so close. I started to think about what the future might be. If I was going to just do what he did and follow him wherever he went. I thought that I didn't want it to be like that. I had a chance to get an education and a good job. I thought maybe we could compromise. I couldn't see why as a woman I couldn't be the one who earned the money or had the good job. It wouldn't



mean I cared less, maybe it would even be a way showing that I cared more about the relationship.

Interestingly, the idea that women's access to education, employment and a career could provide a stimulus to rethinking gender but also contain the necessary coefficient of care within it to sustain a 'serious' relationship was not unique to Angie. Although his thoughts were more speculative and not attached to any specific relationship experience, Dan also seemed to be suggesting that women's access to the high-status, high-paid labour market might provide a vehicle through which conventional understandings of heterosexual relationships and gendered positions within these could potentially be reconfigured. In our second interview I asked him if he thought relationships today were different from those formed by people in his parents' generation. He replied:

Dan: Yes. The main thing is probably that women expect to have careers and good jobs. All the girls here, well nearly all, they're going to uni and want to be doctors and teachers and er lawyers. They don't want to be committed to a relationship as young as maybe people did before. That's a big change. I remember learning about women's education and employment in Modern Studies in like the fourth year and erm people get married and have families later now. It's got a lot to with women coming into work. They can be the bread-winners now.

These last two accounts alert us to the complexity of the processes of negotiating gender which may be taking place within 'serious' relationships. As I have demonstrated these are oriented in relation to discourses about sex and love, commitment and independence, the expression of emotions, and gender differences within the peer group. However, it is clear that they are also informed by wider resources. What we have here are a group of middle-class, academically oriented young people with high aspirations for whom engagement in 'serious' relationships may generate tension with other aspects of their lives, in particular realising their ambitions for their education and future employment. Equipped by their backgrounds with wider expectations and opportunities of this kind, it may well be the case that at least some of these young people will have been able to use their serious relationships to renegotiate the meanings of gender in ways that mark a fundamental break with conventional assumptions.

### **Summary and conclusions**

In concluding this chapter I want to examine how the revised understandings that these young people reached about gender through their 'serious' relationships gave them new insights into how gender was being enacted and produced in the wider context of their relationships with peers and friends and how this enabled them to begin to take up new positions in relation to these enactments.

Stephen was clear about how the understanding of femininity he was developing through his relationship with his girlfriend was influencing his feelings about the ways that some of his male friends talked about love, sex and relationships. As we

talked about his network of friends in our first interview he said that when they talked about relationships they tended to focus on their sexual dimensions:

Stephen: 'What's she like?' or 'What have you done?' or the more immature, erm more immature members of the common room going, 'Have you pumped her yet?' Yeah. They're always on about that. It's funny because I used to be like that. I suppose I still can be actually.

Two things seem to be happening here. First, Stephen distances himself from the 'immature' views of at least some of his male peers, views that, he says, a younger version of himself would have shared and which tend to construct relationships with girls primarily in terms of sex. However, in a surprisingly candid moment of self-reflection, Stephen then goes on to acknowledge that, on occasion, he can still behave in this sexually objectifying manner himself. Angie expressed something similar when, in the part of the interview described above, she continued to talk about her ideas about commitment. In particular, she explained to me how the reworking of femininity that this had entailed had affected her views about what she saw as 'typical girls' talk' within her circle of female friend:

Angie: I think I've changed my feelings about the ways that people talk about relationships...there's a typical girls' talk thing about kind of, 'What's he like?' and 'Is he nice?' and 'Are you serious about him?', which is all right but I feel like it's all a bit false. You know. I mean I like I don't like to talk about my



relationship so much because I just don't see me fitting in with that.

What these accounts suggest is that gender is not simply remade in any absolute way through 'serious' relationships but that it provides alternative means and positions for 'doing' gender which young people may come to see as appropriate to different social contexts and interactions.

In summary then, in this chapter I have explored how young people's views and beliefs about gender and gender differences influenced their experiences of 'serious' relationships. I have described the ways masculinity and femininity were constructed in broadly oppositional terms through some of the discourses which existed within the wider peer group of the sixth year and, furthermore, suggested these reflect the hegemonic position of heterosexual masculinity and its power to determine how gender and gender relations are configured.

I then explored how young people's 'serious' relationships can be seen to represent a site through which these discourses are challenged and reworked. I have shown that, although the power of heterosexual masculinity still percolates through into these relationships, young people could nevertheless begin to find ways of resisting it and, in the process, come to occupy alternative versions of femininity and masculinity. On this basis, I have sought to explore how these renegotiations of gender might feed back into young people's understanding of the 'gender culture' within the sixth year. Not only does this suggest that there is a dynamic interaction between the public and private spheres represented by 'serious' relationships and the peer group,

respectively, but that young people can occupy multiple, even potentially contradictory gendered positions as they shift between these contexts.

Finally, I have suggested that, while the negotiations taking place within this group of young people may share broad characteristics with those happening for other young people, they have particular dimensions which may reflect the kinds of social backgrounds, ambitions and opportunities which prevail among young people from broadly middle-class backgrounds.

## **Chapter seven: Love and the negotiation of transitions**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter my aim is to explore how two particular transitions in these young people's lives influenced their experiences and understandings of their 'serious' relationships. First, I will examine their views on how the transition to the sixth year had contributed to the emergence of the 'serious' relationship as a form of heterosexual coupledness in which young people might be interested in being invested. Second, I will explore how these young people's experiences and understanding of their 'serious' relationships were being influenced by the prospect of leaving school and going on to higher education or training.

These transitions can be seen as 'critical moments' in the young people's lives (Henderson et al. 2007; Thomson et al. 2002). They emerged as points of articulation, or what Rachel Thomson et al. term 'pivots or 'complications' in the unfolding narratives of their 'serious' relationships (Thomson, 2002: 339). It is important however, to acknowledge that my use of this term stretches the bounds of the definition employed by Thomson et al. in one important respect. In their deployment, the concept of a 'critical moment' involves hindsight, that is it refers to ways that individuals organise and account for events which have already passed. For the young people in this study one of these 'moments' had indeed passed – the transition to the sixth year. However, the transition from school to university or training was in progress at the time that I interviewed them. While there is no doubt that this transition was important to these young people, they had not yet the benefit of hindsight to know in precisely what ways it might influence their futures. Their



accounts were not retrospective, they related to events in hand. Despite this, I would argue that the term is still useful and applicable, albeit loosely, in this context. These young people were creating a narrative, even as they lived their experience of making this transition. It was partly prospective, but as I will show, already had retrospective dimensions. In particular, the young people were thinking through this transition in terms of their broader accounts of a planned or imagined life in which they would, by and large, go to university, get a good job and 'settle down' into family life. However, they were also rethinking their relationship experiences in relation to both the transition that they were going through and these plans. I would argue that these young people were 'in' this 'critical moment' and hence were, as Sheila Henderson et al. put it, at a point in time at which 'it is possible to change and rework the stories which they were telling themselves about themselves and about their lives' (Henderson et al., 2007: 32).

### **'Serious' relationships and the negotiation of the sixth year**

In Chapter Four I mapped the relationship histories of the young people involved in this study and identified a typology of relationships. In so doing, I described how these young people reconstructed their earlier relationship experiences in relation to the idea of there being a broad trajectory which lead to the 'serious' relationship; a relatively new and emergent form of heterosexual relationship in their lives. I want to progress that examination here by demonstrating that the emergence of the 'serious' relationship was connected in important ways to these young people's negotiation of the transition to the sixth year. I will argue that this process made engagement in 'serious' relationships characterised by emotional commitment not just possible but, for some of them, desirable at this point in their lives.

Peter Redman (1999: 248-256) makes some very important points about the ways that the trajectory of young people's relationships histories may be connected with the processes of negotiating schooling. In his study of young men's investments in romance he identifies the shift to the post-compulsory phase of education as being particularly significant because it may validate a more individualised identity, be associated with a move away from homosociality to heterosociality and thus create space for the mobilisation of their increased interest and investment in 'serious' relationships with young women.

Something similar did indeed seem to be pertinent for the young people involved in this study, in that the transition to the sixth year seemed to be linked in some important ways to their understanding of 'serious' relationships and the meanings and significance which could be attributed to them. These following extracts from my first interview with Dan exemplify some of the ways that the young people involved in this study characterised the relationship between this transition and their interest and participation in 'serious' relationships. The following extract, from our first interview, flows on from me asking Dan to elaborate on why he thought that his relationships had changed from 'just seeing someone' to what he termed, 'wanting to stay with them for a while'. He began by telling me that, 'I sort of feel I've changed since moving into sixth year. I've become a bit more confident about stuff.' He went on to explain how his 'wanting' to have a 'serious' relationship seemed to be associated with this transition.

**Dan:** I think it's just, in the sixth year I'm more, before I was never really too bothered about it, sort of, going out with someone was always sort of (.) it wasn't as big a deal. There was always something else to do, really. I mean, that's it, but in sixth year, it's sort of something I wanted to do and that was it.

Redman argues that the greater emphasis on individuality in post-compulsory education might help to create space for this interest in 'serious' relationships, and this too was evident in Dan's account. Here he focuses particularly on the changes in the relationship with teachers with regard to issues of student discipline and the increased emphasis on self-regulation and self-direction. These seem to be part of his perceptions of wider reconfiguration of his status and identity which may help to create the conditions in which his interest in 'serious' relationships can emerge.

**SF:** Are you treated a bit differently then [by teachers]?

**Dan:** We are, totally. Yeah. There's a lot more, sort of respect between everyone in the sixth year. It's. I mean the staff as well.

**SF:** How's that different?

**Dan:** I don't know, it's just always, I mean, if you do something wrong in sixth year they'll maybe just sort of have a wee laugh and a joke with you. Instead of being really strict on you and they know that you'll sort yourself out. I mean, they know, they sort of know you better, they know you're not going to do anything bad.



The linking of a sense of greater individuality, self-direction and responsibility with an increasing interest in 'serious' relationship seems to take place in this account primarily through the notion of 'respect' that Dan introduces into his description of changes in relationships between the young people in the sixth year and these young people and school staff. I want to emphasise that my argument is made somewhat tentatively at this point. In my interviews with Dan I did not explore what 'respect' meant and so my interpretation may be placing too much emphasis on one dimension which is of interest to me. However, I would argue that 'respect' might involve Dan in developing a heightened sense not only of his own individuality but that of other members of his peer group. It certainly seems plausible that the social practices involved in becoming a sixth year student are significant in young people learning to relate to themselves as persons who possess 'individuality' in terms of being self-directed and largely responsible for their own behaviour and that the 'serious' relationship may be, at least in part, a cultural response to this – a way of both working oneself into this new identity space as well as of 'doing' relationships that are made possible and plausible by this space. In this respect then, the emerging sense that people are individuals and that they can be available to each other as such, may be in some respects important in opening up the possibility of forging emotional investments in the context of a 'serious' relationship. Certainly Dan's comments about 'respect' reference changes in the social practices within the peer network and in particular a perception that with the transition to the sixth year there had been an increase in the amount of interaction between young people in different friendship and other forms of social grouping. These changes were mentioned by several

interviewees, including Hayley, Lynsey, Shane, Doug, Angus and Julie. Julie described these changes as follows:

Julie: I think people have got closer in the sixth year. I mean, people mix more. You know, you can talk to people you would never have spoken to before when you were in younger years. I have spoken with people who, well we might as well have been in different schools. We knew each other but not to talk to, but not anything about each other really. I think it's really changed. It's like we all know each other now.

While Julie painted a picture of much increased levels of sociability and social mobility within the sixth year, it is important to acknowledge that some other interviewees felt that, although there was greater potential for movement and social engagement across the peer group, this was not universally available to and perhaps not universally desired by all the young people in the sixth year. It might also be the case that, rather than being a ubiquitous feature of everyday life in the culture of the sixth year, it had more prominence in relation to specific events, such as the celebration of birthdays. For example, in Lynsey's detailed description of the social groups that she discerned in the sixth year, she strongly emphasises the different degrees to which small friendship groups intermingled within the common room and identified some of the circumstances under which this happened. In eliciting this account I drew on my observations (described in part in Chapter Three) to try to more precisely understand Lynsey's description and encourage her to explicate it.

**Lynsey:** Well there's the cool people ((Lynsey laughs)). Erm. And then (.) you know there's like two groups, three groups that kind of intermingle. I don't know if you, if you go into the common room, there's a group that are on your left.

**SF:** Ok, by the window?

**Lynsey:** Uh huh. The group by the window, the first group by the window. Then there's the one with the bed, the second group on your right. And then the group at the top corner and those three kind of interchange, and then the two diagonal groups switch about...but not much they're like basically a boy group and a girl group

**SF:** And so when people, do they mix in these groups or?

**Lynsey:** [Y]eah. They tend to stick, like in our corner...or the window group, kind of, more the guys from the window group, not really the girls. Em and a couple of people from the group just behind us, but there's going to be a party after the exams for three people's birthday. It's their 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, 'cause they're not going to get to do their 18<sup>th</sup>, 'cause it's February and everyone'll be away, so it's a girl from our group and a guy from our group, and the girl's twin brother, who's in the group by the window. So, it's going to basically include those three groups, so that'll be quite good.

Lynsey continued for some time elaborating and emphasising the gender balance or imbalance within and between these groups of young people and connecting this



with their degree of investment in academic achievement and the extent to which they mixed with other groups. In her view there were two predominantly single-sex groups comprising people who were particularly 'brainy' and academic. These groups mixed less with the other three groups in which both young women and men were represented. Lynsey also said that the groups were distinguished by the degree of interest and investment of their members in 'serious' relationships. In her account the young people in the two single-sex groups tended not to be so interested in 'serious' relationships but focused on their school work and attaining good grades in their Highers and Advanced Highers.

Seen alongside each other, Julie and Lynsey's accounts seem to suggest that they both had a sense that the possibilities for social interaction within the sixth year were different from those which had been available to these young people before entry to it. Moreover, in Lynsey's account it becomes apparent that some of the ways that these changes can be charted and understood relate to the perceived degree of homosociality of friendship and social groups and the extent of interest, investment and engagement in 'serious' relationships of the young people within these groups.

In her account Lynsey also suggests that in some circumstances the combination of heterosociality and 'serious' relationships could confer particular status on a group and thereby the young people within that group. In contrast, largely homosocial friendship and social groups could be seen as less mature. As Lynsey put it, describing the young people in these two groups within the common room, 'they're not really interested in relationships, they're a bit geeky really, they haven't moved

on yet, and you can't see them wanting to have too much of a good time or be in a relationship.'

It is crucial to note that this account may be being mediated in a number of ways. First, it referred primarily to social interaction within the sixth-year common room. This was an important social arena, but by no means the only social arena in which sixth years interacted with each other. In other contexts, like those represented by lessons and extra-curricular activities, they would almost certainly be in different groups and the social relationships between individuals could, as a result, be negotiated in different ways. Second, Lynsey, like all the other interviewees, identified herself primarily a member of one of the heterosocial friendship groups in which young people were interested in and engaged in 'serious' relationships. Some of the apparent status associated with this may have been derived from the research process. By expressing an interest in young people's experiences of 'serious' relationships I may have been contributing to their promotion as particularly meaningful and as having a 'high' status. In addition, this focus may have sidelined references to other forms of social interaction within the sixth year which might have configured interviewees' perceptions of the relationships between friendship and social groups in other ways. For example, if I had focused on academic achievement or the importance of same-sex friendships, this might have made available to interviewees a range of different positions from which to describe the social networks within the sixth year and alternative ways to locate themselves within them.

However, despite the importance of acknowledging that perceptions of social groupings within the sixth year together with the types of interaction within and

between young people in those groups, and their relative status, would almost certainly be renegotiated in different contexts within the school, what the young people's accounts suggest is that the process of transition to the sixth year opens up 'serious' relationships as a resource which can be mobilised in relation to understanding and negotiating the reconfigured social network that the sixth year represents. If this is the case, the desirability of having a 'serious' relationship, to which Dan referred above, can be seen as connected to these young people's negotiation of the transition to the sixth year. That is, this transition not only made it possible to have 'serious' relationships but also made it potentially desirable. This was also suggested in Gareth's account above and is articulated more fully in the following extract from my first interview with Julie. I had asked her about how her relationship with her current boyfriend had come about and she replied:

Julie: I hadn't been in relationships for a year. Then with the sixth year I just wanted to be in a relationship that's like...just having someone to be with and someone special and close. Also some of my friends had a boyfriend...and that I felt, 'Oh, I want a boyfriend', so it's good that I got one.

Julie refers here to the transition to the sixth year as marking a time at which she 'just wanted' to be in a 'serious' relationship which was 'special and close'. However, it also suggests that she was, in part, connecting her interest in having 'serious' relationship with her perceptions of some of her female friends' experiences. It is difficult to infer from Julie's comments to what extent or how these factors might be connected. Indeed it seems very likely, as other research has shown, that 'having a



boyfriend' can be an important aspect of negotiating position, status and a sense of belonging within heterosexual young women's friendship groups at other times in, and other contexts than the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education (Duncan, 2004). However, by coupling the ideas of the transition and the experiences of her friends together as factors which contextualise her desire for a 'serious' relationship, Julie does seem to be suggesting that they are related in some way. I would argue that this might be associated with the emergence of a particular culture within the sixth year around 'serious' relationships, homo- and hetero-sociality, and perceptions of the self and others in terms of maturity to which Lynsey referred. This is not to say that Julie saw it in the same way as Lynsey (as her comments about the changes in relationships within the peer group cited above suggest) but that the student culture which Lynsey described provided one, and perhaps one of the most important, resources against which Julie could orient her account.

These accounts which place a relatively high emphasis on the significance of the transition to the sixth year as a factor influencing interest, investment and engagement in 'serious' relationships need to be seen in relation to accounts from those young people who were in relationships that had been formed prior to this transition and straddled it. Here I want briefly to return to data generated through my interviews with Doug and Scott who were in relationships which, at the time of interview, had been going on for around four years and just over a year, respectively. As I have suggested, for Doug it was wider family events which he perceived had been most influential on changes in the kind of emotional investment and meanings which he attached to his relationship with his girlfriend. For Scott, the transition to the sixth year was important and had altered his relationship with his girlfriend but

not primarily because of the changes it made possible to his emotional investment in their relationship, but because his girlfriend had left school at this transition to pursue career-related training. Interestingly, however, Scott nonetheless perceived that his own relationship now operated against an emergent culture of 'serious' relationships. What Scott seemed to feel was that it was important to 'keep my relationship out of school'. He saw this as a way of avoiding the issue of having to engage with the dynamics around position and status within the peer group which he saw others negotiating through their 'serious' relationships. However, it also seems to me that, in resisting engaging with these processes he was also operating in relation to the relationship culture which was emerging within the sixth year. Far from suggesting that it was unimportant or irrelevant he was reflecting its effects and also positioning himself in relation to it.

Scott: I mean my relationship isn't really in school at all now. Not since my girlfriend left when we came into the sixth year. It's something we keep out of school. I don't think it's anything to do with school really. I mean people know about it, obviously, but it's not something I want to make a big deal of. I mean having a girlfriend and being in a relationship is a big thing to some people but to me it's important not be seen like that.

To summarise then, what I am arguing here is that for the young people involved in this study the 'serious' relationship is linked in important ways to their transition to the sixth year. Even when this transition was seen as less important by individual young people as a factor initiating their interest and engagement in 'serious'



relationships, the emergent relationship culture in which 'serious' relationships were deemed desirable and prestigious was still part of the background against which the young people positioned and understood their relationship experiences.

I have also argued that while the impact of this transition in these young people's relationship culture was clear, there was a great deal of diversity of relationship activity. Some young people had ongoing relationships in which at various times (and not necessarily in the order suggested by the trajectory which I outlined in Chapter Four), they saw their focal investment as being sexual or romantic as well as 'serious'. Others did not see changes in the nature of their relationships as related in especially significant ways to the transition from compulsory to non-compulsory schooling but more closely linked to events outside it, for example those taking place in their family. This is an issue that I will explore more closely in Chapter Eight.

### **'Serious' relationships and the negotiation of the transition from school**

The transition to the sixth year can be seen as an important contributing factor in creating the conditions under which these young people's interest and investment in 'serious' relationships could take place. The influence of the transition from school to university or training that these young people were negotiating at the time of the interviews produced a different set of issues and concerns. For some of these young people, including Shane, Hayley, Julie and Stephen, the prospect of leaving school and home and moving away to university represented at best a challenge and at worst a threat to the maintenance of their 'serious' relationships. For a few other young people, the imminent move represented an opportunity. Franco saw it as means to leave the area and to move nearer to his girlfriend. Lynsey, Angus and Dan had



decided that they would postpone thinking about relationships until they had got to university and, as Lynsey put it, could 'begin a new life, with new people'.

However, there was no simple relationship between the young people's relationship status, how emotionally committed they felt to their relationships and how they saw the imminent transition from school. As I will demonstrate, Doug, for example, had seemed in our first interview to be ambivalent about the likely impact on his relationship of leaving school and going to university. He and his girlfriend had a shared plan to study in the same city and hence, he seemed to suggest, their relationship could continue. However, between our first and second interview Doug's girlfriend's plans changed when she did not secure a place at university. In our second interview Doug was facing the prospect of their relationship coming to an end as his girlfriend was thinking of going abroad for a year. Doug's earlier ambivalence seemed to be replaced by a realisation about how strongly he felt towards his girlfriend and, as I will show, he was already trying to understand this in the light of the relationship's probable end.

Something similar happened to Shane in that he failed to secure the place at university that he wanted and was, at the time of our second interview, considering taking up an engineering apprenticeship. He, like Doug, was thinking hard about how he felt about his girlfriend and their relationship. However, so uncomfortable was he with the prospect of being separated from his girlfriend that, rather than take up the apprenticeship, he was contemplating staying in the locality and thereby ensuring that his relationship with would be maintained.

Angie's feelings about her relationship with her boyfriend were also clarified by this transition. She thought that it was unlikely that they could maintain their relationship through university and described herself as actively avoiding making too heavy an emotional commitment to it in order to mitigate the likely pain and disappointment if it ended.

Gareth and Scott saw leaving school in different ways again. Gareth had just formed a relationship and, although the likely impact that leaving home for university would have on it was on his mind, he was trying to put this aside. As he said he, 'hadn't really thought about it. Or tried not to really'. More optimistically, Scott considered the transition to be 'nothing major'. He thought that he and his girlfriend were already used to periods of absence from each other and that their relationship 'could take it'.

What I am suggesting here is that, despite the diversity of ways in which these young people were experiencing and envisaging the transition from school, each considered this transition as, in some way, a critical moment. It was time at which their feelings and expectations about current and future relationships came into focus. Moreover, I would argue that their experiences are configured around a concern which is particular to them as group of academically-oriented and socially aspirant young people from broadly middle-class backgrounds. All these young people shared an ambition to enter higher education or training and then move into a professional career. None of them questioned the importance of gaining what Shane termed, 'a good education, and making something of yourself'. They all saw the next few years of their lives in terms of studying for degrees and other equivalent qualifications and



then, as Stephen described it, 'getting a good job, settling down, maybe starting a family'. This was the 'given' into which they had to work their views and experiences of relationships. Consequently, they faced questions about where 'serious' relationships fitted into this vision of their lives and about whether or not 'serious' relationships could be accommodated with the pursuit of their educational aims.

In the following sections of this chapter I will examine in detail three examples of the ways that these young people were addressing and beginning to resolve these issues. In the first section I will look in particular at Julie's views and experiences. These were similar to those of Hayley and Stephen in that all three were committed to maintaining their current 'serious' relationships and finding ways of doing so at the same time as moving on from school and pursuing their studies at university. The prospect of leaving school and moving away from home seemed to have made them clearer about the importance and depth of their emotional investment in their relationships and had led to them to make plans to enable them to maintain these at the same time as continuing with their studies. By way of a contrast, in the second section I will examine Doug and Angie's accounts. As I have previously suggested, in both of these the prospect of leaving school had brought their feelings about their relationships into focus but with quite different outcomes. For Doug, a sudden change in his girlfriend's plans left him facing up to the probability that their relationship would end. In our second interview he seemed to be confused and upset as this prospect made him realise the depth of his feelings about his relationship to his girlfriend. Angie also found that negotiating the transition from school helped her to clarify her feelings about her relationship to her boyfriend. She enjoyed it, but as



she reported when her boyfriend talked about 'it lasting for ever' she realised that such a level of commitment was unrealistic and untenable and that although she was close to her boyfriend, moving on might be an opportunity to break off what was becoming an inequitable relationship in terms of their respective emotional commitment. In the third section I will examine Lynsey and Dan's accounts. These has many similarities to those of Angus and Angie in that Lynsey had decided to, as she described it, 'put relationships to one side until I get to university'. For these young people this transition marked an opportunity to, as Angus said, 'move on, maybe get things sorted out and settled and then see what happens in terms of relationships'.

#### *Moving on and maintaining a 'serious' relationship*

In the context of our first interview Julie had described her long-term investment in her career plans. Studying in London was an essential part of realising her ambitions and also bound up with her sense of her identity. As she put it, 'It's what I do, I've always been a performer and I want to do this to find out if it's really me. I need to go to college to find that out'. Julie was also very much in love with her boyfriend. She was hoping to be able to pursue her studies and also to maintain her relationship. In fact, as she told me in our first interview, her boyfriend was already making plans to move with her when she left home.

Julie: Well he wants, he got offered a job in London and he didn't take it 'cos he would have had to already be away by now and he didn't really want to leave, but he says if a job offer comes up in London, he'll go, and if not, well he's applied to [other

employers] anyway, and then if the worst comes to the worst, he says he wants to just get transferred....and he can figure out what to do from there, 'cos I think he wants to come with me.

Initially then, Julie focused primarily on the practicalities of making the transition to college and maintaining her relationship. However, as Julie and I continued to talk it became clearer how Julie interpreted her boyfriend's resolution to move away with her as a sign of his commitment to their relationship. What seems particularly interesting is that this amplified her feelings for him. I asked her what she thought about his proposal to seek a job transfer.

Julie: Good because erm (.) I think it'd be hard to not go away and not be with him but I think it'd be so difficult to go and still be with him, and be in London, him being here. It wouldn't work. But also it means I'll know someone when I go, erm instead of just being completely alone...Like (.) I always think about what he would want me to do and what he would want to do, and I think about him quite a lot. Em, and I think before I started going out with [him] I was just doing my own thing, just really cared about me and what I wanted to do, but erm (.) I think, like, I just want to, like, do what makes him happy and stuff, yeah. Seeing what he will do for me, moving away to be with me, just makes me realise how much I feel for him and need him.

Hayley's and Stephen's accounts of their experiences of negotiating the transition from school to university were in many ways similar to Julie's. Hayley's boyfriend also had a job and was planning to apply for a transfer and move with her. Stephen and his girlfriend had applied to study at universities in the same town so that they could maintain their relationship. As was the case for Julie, for both Hayley and Stephen, the prospect of being apart from their partners had served to emphasise their commitment to their relationships. As Stephen put it, 'When you think you might lose it, you realise just how much you need it'.

### *Moving on and breaking up*

Doug too was planning to go to university with the ultimate aim of entering a profession. He and his girlfriend had both applied to study at institutions in the same city. In our first interview I asked him how he viewed the prospect of the transition and whether their decisions about where to pursue their education had been made with their relationship in mind. Doug's response sidestepped the issue. Rather than answering my question about making choices about where to study, he addressed the issue of whether his relationship with girlfriend would continue.

Doug:        You know, there's another (..) you know (..) months anyway, and then once we're at uni there's a whole life ahead of us and (..) things, you know? ... I mean, looking at it logically I can't see myself in forty years married to my girlfriend with three kids....I think I'm, I'm sensible enough to, I mean, it's just my teenage years, so (..) that's that, but we'll see. I mean (..) we know each other so well already. I mean (..) by September



we'll probably be sick and tired of each other but it's (..) it's just something (..) we'll have to see, wait and see what happens.

Doug seemed to be suggesting that he thought things might change when they reached university. I felt that he was suggesting that his relationship with girlfriend might even come to end at this time, and whether or not it did, he seemed not to envision them being a couple far in the future. Indeed, he appeared to associate his relationship with his 'teenage years' as if it was a feature of the 'here and now' rather than something ongoing. While Doug distanced the transition as 'months away' and couched his views on his relationship in terms of rationality, I sensed that I had touched on a complex and sensitive issue. By the time of our second interview the situation had changed dramatically and there was a new and elegiac quality to his account. When we spoke he told me that his girlfriend had not got a place at the university of her choice.

**SF:** So what's the plan now?

**Doug:** She doesn't have a clue. She needs to work all summer and erm (..) an hour ago, she, I think she probably gonna she's got her heart set on (..) going to Canada to teach how to ski, people how to ski, she's a really good skier. And it's one of these courses that you go on, you go on for a year, you get put with accommodation and you get a job and (..) it's something that, she, she wants to travel so (..) I think it was, she, it really hit

her so we got help her through that as well. Erm, she can do a bit of French as well so

**SF:** How do you feel about the prospect of (.) what's it mean for you two, for your relationship?

**Doug:** It's just something (..) I mean (..) these things happen, you have to, erm we don't think about it, cos you kinda of doing your head in and its, so, whatever happens, happens. Erm (...) That's that.

**SF:** So?

(..) Well we'll stay in touch, I'm, I'm adamant about that actually but I mean (...) 'you can't, I can't possibly say it wholehearted but erm (...) I'll be happy for her.' You'll need to go and, and say this is life, but you know, but you need to go out and have fun, these are the, uni, uni is a, the golden years of your adulthood. Like school was, five years, you know, I'm adult ((Claps and his hands together)) and I've got reputation and er (..) and a life ambition to live life to the full.

This was obviously a time of intense stress for Doug. The emphasis that he put on the immediacy and fluidity of events through his reference to his girlfriend's thinking 'an hour ago' reflected his sense of the instability of the situation which he articulated through his statement about it 'doing your head in'. The powerful emotions running here affected me as is evident in my rather stunned, monosyllabic contribution midway through this extract. Reading it again, I detect Doug both wrestling with the powerful feelings of the moment and trying to position himself

and understand them in terms of a broader canvas. Whether or not he felt that his girlfriend's plans were tantamount to a subordination of their relationship to immediate disappointments and longer term plans, his reference to 'being happy for her' in the context of supporting his girlfriend's decision to go abroad suggests an attempt to mitigate his sadness at the prospect of the ending of their relationships by positioning himself as adopting a rational, humane view of her needs. He also seems already to be trying to find a way of defining and understanding the relationship, as if it has already ended, locating it as a feature of his school years, embracing the new circumstances as an element of transition to adulthood, and remarking on his need to live up to his 'reputation' (which he described as 'happy go lucky' and 'one of the lads'). In all, the extract suggests that Doug is working hard to make the situation more manageable and to protect his feelings. Although he had seemed ambivalent about his relationship with his girlfriend in our first interview, it seemed in our second as if the threat to it posed by the ways events were playing out had brought new feelings into play. Indeed, that fact that Doug's girlfriend was prepared to go abroad to further her career, and hence effectively bring their relationship to an end, may well have made him feel vulnerable and that his investment in the relationship was not fully reciprocated. As we talked on he seemed to find a way of describing his relationship and feelings for his girlfriend in which he could both acknowledge their importance and give them meaning as 'his first love' in an as yet incomplete narrative of his love life.

Doug: Er I think er (..) we both have, you know, unconscious (..) erm you know, erm really deep feelings. I mean, I'm, wherever. wherever I am in 25 years I'll always remember her as being



probably my first love and what not, so there is something, you know, deep down inside that erm she will (.) stay there (.) for the rest of my life.

I have bracketed Angie's account with Doug's because it too demonstrates how the prospect of leaving school and home was influencing her relationship. However, rather than leading her to feel more strongly towards her partner, this transition had led her to feel less committed.

Angie: I don't know. 'Cos if you love someone, and you break up, and then it's got to be worse and...if something goes wrong and I, I'm going to uni at the end of year. 'It's a simple fact'.

SF: So have you talked about that?

Angie: He reckons it will last through uni and that's it, basically, he thinks it'll be, we'll do that and I really don't think it's gonna happen ((laughs))

SF: Ok. So...how did that discussion evolve, then? So if he's saying to you, oh I think it'll be fine, we'll get through it?

Angie: Yeah, well I just told him, I said the chances are so tiny (.) people staying together (.) especially at our age I mean what are the chances? It's highly unrealistic I suppose it's possible, but I don't think it's likely.

What seems to be going on here is that Angie is trying to be realistic about the chances of this relationship continuing. As she says, 'at our age ... what are the

chances?'. However, what is particularly interesting in this context is that Angie seems to be suggesting that she is deliberately exercising control over her feelings in order to minimise the risks that being naïvely optimistic would entail. This is apparent, in particular, in her opening comments where she says, 'if you love someone and then break up it's got to be worse'. The implication here would seem to be Angie was resisting investing too heavily in the relationship in order to guard against hurting her own but also her boyfriend's feelings.

### *Moving on and making a fresh start*

Lynsey, Angus and Dan all shared a third perspective on how the prospect of leaving school influenced their views about 'serious' relationships. For them, the move away represented an opportunity to develop a new social circle, form new friendships and in this context, perhaps form a 'serious' relationship. As Dan put it:

Dan:           The way I see it is that once I get away to uni I'll be meeting new people and having new experiences. I guess it might be then that a relationship comes about. I mean, it seems better to wait and see than get into anything now. It might be difficult to get too involved and then have to (.) you know, deal with that. I think it's something for the future.

Lynsey expressed a similar view, but for her the issue of greatest importance was being able to live in close proximity rather than having to maintain a relationship 'at a distance', a fact reflecting her experience in a previous relationship in which her boyfriend had 'gone travelling' for several months.

Lynsey: Well, I think I will probably meet someone at uni. I am just going to wait until then. See what happens ((laughs)). I feel like my experiences of trying to be in relationship with someone who is not around for a long time have kind of educated me to that. I know that's not for me. I have to be able to see them and spend time with them more often. So, I'll just enjoy the end of school and then see what happens next.

To summarise then, what I am arguing here is that the young people involved in this study saw leaving school for university and training as a transition that had a number of significant implications for their serious relationships. The picture is complex, partly because these young people were engaged in the processes of making this transition at the time of our interviews. This meant that many of the outcomes and implications of the transition were not yet fully clear. Those young people engaged in 'serious' relationships were faced with having to decide whether they wanted or would be able to maintain their relationships. For others, the prospect of leaving school and home and going to university represented an opportunity to forge new friendships and, perhaps, from out of these, new relationships. In all cases this transition represented a 'critical moment' at which their views, experiences and expectations of relationships had to be re-considered.

### **Summary and conclusions**

In this chapter I have explored how two particular transitions in the lives of the young people who participated in this study influenced their experiences and



understandings of their 'serious' relationships. In the first part of the chapter I examined their views on how the transition to the sixth year contributed to the emergence of the 'serious' relationship as a form of heterosexual coupledness in which young people might be interested or invested. Second, I explored how these young people's experiences and understanding of their 'serious' relationships were influenced by the prospect of leaving school and going on to higher education or training. Through my analysis I have demonstrated that the 'serious' relationship is linked in important ways to these young people's experience and negotiation of these transitions.

With regard to the transition to the sixth year I have shown that, although it was not uniformly important in initiating the young people's interest and engagement in 'serious' relationships, the relationship culture which emerged from it – one in which serious relationships were seen as desirable – was part of the background against which they all positioned and understood their relationship experiences.

With regard to the transition from school to higher education or training, I have suggested that, although there was again considerable diversity among these young people's experiences of the ways that this transition influenced their 'serious' relationships, it was nonetheless a critical moment at which they reflected on their relationship experiences and expectations.

What these findings suggest is that young people's experiences of relationships are associated in important ways with the opportunities which socially-structured transitions create for adopting ways of seeing self and others. As such, they can be

seen as critical moments at which structural changes initiate or connect with changes in subjective experiences. Furthermore, these transitions are contexts in which the meanings attached to relationship experiences – both current, past and prospective – come under close scrutiny and, potentially, are changed.

In addition, I have shown that not only can transitional moments play upon young people's relationship experiences but they also influence the choices that young people make at these times. This was especially the case with respect to the transition from school to university where, for some people, decisions about their education and training were being influenced by the depth of their investment in their relationships.

This chapter also raises a question about whether, for some young people, the 'serious' relationship may be a form of heterosexual coupledness which is confined to the years between entry to the sixth year and leaving school. This is a question to I will return in the final chapter of this thesis.

## **Chapter eight: The influence of ‘family’ on young people’s ‘serious’ relationships**

That dear octopus we call the family, from whose tentacles we can never quite escape, nor in our innermost hearts never quite wish to (Smith, 1939: 55).

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I aim to explore the influence of the family on young people’s experiences of ‘serious’ relationships. References to ‘family’ saturated the interview data, and went far beyond responses to questions that I raised in the second round of interviews about the structure of young people’s families and their impressions of the qualities of relationships within them. The family emerged as an important reference point for their conduct, understanding and expectations of their ‘serious’ relationships, as a source of support and advice, and a regulatory influence.

One effect of this is, as I will demonstrate, that in important ways the meanings and practices that constitute young people’s serious relationships are made and remade via their interactions with parents in the context of everyday family life in the home and in relation to the examples provided by parental relationships and significant moments in family history. As these data will illustrate, young people’s ‘serious’ relationships are not solely constituted within the interpersonal space of their ‘couple’ on which the ‘family’ has an influence as some exterior force but are part of and constituted through relations with specific others in the family circle.



For example, some young people had received support in the formation or maintenance of relationships; others looked to their parents' relationship as a model. The ways that these had been formed, the processes involved in their maintenance and conduct and, in some cases, the ways in which they had broken down were perceived as highly influential on their own relationship experiences. They saw their own 'serious' relationships as located on trajectories mapped out by their parents' experiences. The influential effect of a wider array of emotionally loaded events within the family was also evident. Some young people felt strongly that their experiences of significant moments in family history – bereavements, illness, upsets and conflict – were generative of their views and expectations of 'serious' relationships. They also attributed some of their vulnerabilities and anxieties about emotional commitment, their fears of loss or needs for love and capacity to form and maintain 'serious' relationships primarily to the impact of these events on them.

The family was also synonymous with the home as a physical setting where a great deal of young people's time as a couple was spent. The ways that young people's 'serious' relationships were accommodated and integrated or kept separate from the family home had important ramifications. Boyfriends and girlfriends might become part of the extended family, be taken on holidays and, in one case, have physically taken up residency in the family home. Not only did young people thereby form relationships with members of their partner's families but also have an opportunity to observe the emotional dynamics within that family's life. Watching how one's partner's family interacted, and especially how one's boyfriend or girlfriend was treated by, and treated, their parents, was perceived to be an important resource in

forming a deeper understanding of aspects of their character and their emotional capacity to contribute to and maintain the couple's 'serious' relationship.

Within the broad array of influences sketched out here I want to concentrate on exploring three specific themes under which they can be grouped. First, I intend to examine the issue of the regulatory role played by the family in relation to young people's 'serious' relationships. My focus here is on how the family, and particularly parents and carers, acknowledge and accommodate these relationships and the ways in which this is understood and responded to by young people and thereby perceived to affect them. This receives the greatest attention within the chapter reflecting its status within the data. Second, I will explore how parental relationships and, to a lesser extent, other 'serious' relationships within the family, function as resources and reference points for young people's conduct, understanding and experience of their own 'serious' relationships. Finally, I will briefly turn my attention to the accounts which refer to significant moments in family history which were perceived to be generative of young people's emotional capacities and vulnerabilities which were then influential on their 'serious' relationships.

### **The family and constructions of emotion**

Before exploring these three themes in more detail it is necessary to make some prefacing comments with regard to the family and its role as a site of emotional activity. First, it is important to acknowledge that the family is not a transparent, universal or unproblematic category or concept in sociological terms but a contested and complex historical and socio-cultural phenomenon freighted with ideological meanings (Muncie et al., 1997: 10).



One way of tackling the task of defining the family is to take a grounded approach and specify what it meant to the young interviewees involved in this study. This can be achieved by referring to the biographical information provided by young people who participated in individual interviews. As I have noted, references to the family pervaded these interview data and it was often possible to build a picture from these sources of with whom interviewees were living and their domestic arrangements. However, I also supplemented these data by, in our second interview, systematically asking interviewees who they lived with, what these people did, and the character, nature and emotional qualities and significance of these relationships to them. A detailed description of the sample based on these data has been given in Chapter Four. What this demonstrated was that, while the parents of these young people fit into a fairly narrow definition (heterosexual, middle-class, white and Scottish) in terms of sexual orientation, occupation, socio-economic class and ethnicity, the composition of the family was much richer and more complex than this suggests.

For example, 11 young people in the sample of 14 who provided individual interviews lived with their married, biological parents. However, one of these young people was a child from a second marriage and her older sibling was what she termed a 'half-sister' born to her mother and biological father before their separation. Of the other three interviewees, two lived with one biological parent and a step-parent (in one case a stepfather and the other a stepmother) and one with a biological parent and their partner (a mother and her boyfriend). Among the young people living in these reconstituted families two had what they termed two families – one with each of their biological parents. In all cases these new families included either 'half' or



‘step’ siblings. One interviewee shifted their residence between these families while the other lived with their mother and her boyfriend and saw her father only rarely.

Three of these interviewees were an only child. Of the 11 with siblings, eight were a youngest child, in most cases their older siblings were living outside the family home although they might be part-time resident especially if they were students. In only three cases were the interviewees the oldest of the children in their family and in only one were they a middle child. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, and siblings’ partners and spouses figured in most of these young people’s descriptions of their family although the degree of contact with them and physical and emotional proximity varied.

Families characterised by the potentially complex relational structures which the arrangements imply have been described as ‘post-modern’ (Jamieson, 1998: 33).

They are posited to be reflective of a particular historical and socio-cultural context in which the concept of the ‘modern’ family as an entity based on a marriage borne of a combination of the pressures of economics, the demands of the industrialised labour market and adherence to religious conventions and practices, is giving way to what has been termed the ‘public story’ that family is ‘the natural outcome of a loving and sexually charged relationship between a man and woman’ (Jamieson, 1998: 23; Parsons, 1964). As the ties associated with community and kinship have eroded, so the family has taken within it ‘ideologies of romantic and eroticised love and marriage’ and been reconstructed primarily as a site of private and emotional bonding between individuals (Robinson, 1991:1; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Felmler and Sprecher, 2006). Despite the fact that this concept of the ‘family’ is under pressure and contested by other forms of intimacy and union, it continues to

represent a powerful cultural norm (Berger and Berger, 1983; Robinson, 1991; Shipman and Smart, 2007).

The reconfiguration of the family has involved its re-conceptualisation as constellating around a parental relationship defined primarily in terms of emotional investments, commitments and romanticised love. This process has also involved imbuing it with special significance as an arena for emotional labour and expression. The family has become inwards looking, situated in relation to the 'rational' and exterior public sphere as a site both of potential resistance to it, as a vehicle for mediating the demands it places on people to engage in emotional labour as part of the social roles they play outside it and a place where emotional authenticity might be realised through 'real' relationships and investments of which the exterior world seems so devoid (Brody, 1999: 4; Hochschild, 2003: 204). With feelings placed at the heart of the family one of its chief roles becomes the socialising of children in terms of their emotional development so that they can understand and conform to cultural norms around feelings and the display and management of emotion; one of the family's jobs is to enable children to learn who can express what feelings, and how and in what circumstances (Ruddick, 1982). Some of the mechanisms by which this is achieved have been well reported (Mayall, 1998; Brody, 1999). For example, Berry Mayall (1998) has described how these processes are bound up with the management and gendering of the body as a means of regulating and shaping capacities to feel, emotional repertoires, strategies and means for the management, experience and understanding of feeling. Leslie Brody (1999) has noted how both emotional and bodily comportment during play and domestic activities, routines and duties are means by which children learn from their parents about age, gender and



setting appropriate emotional expressions – what Brody has termed when to be ‘sad’ and when to be ‘mad’ (Brody, 1999: 142). Of course, these processes of emotional learning are not simply or solely didactic but dynamic, and family engagement in the reproduction of emotional cultures and identities also involves constant labour at the recreation of the family and roles within it. For example, the presence and absence of women and men within the family, the roles that they occupy and especially their relationships to engagement in emotional labour not only transmit powerful messages about identity, role, gender and emotion but are also under constant renegotiation (Hochschild, 2003: 104-118).

In this context it is relevant to say something about some of the findings and results of research on the characteristics of the relationships between parents and young people in late adolescence and by doing so to locate young people’s ‘serious’ relationships within the emotional transactions and dynamics of family life. Several studies have suggested that an important dynamic within parent–child relationships at this time is the negotiation of young people’s increasing autonomy and rights to privacy weighed against parental desires for intimacy and some form of control over their behaviour. This is accomplished, especially in middle-class families through mother–child interaction, via the formation of relationships based on communication, openness, intimacy and trust (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989; Brannen et al., 1994; Langford et al., 2001; Solomon et al., 2002). Young people’s ‘serious’ relationships are inevitably an important element within this because they involve them in behaviours through which they stake claims for new freedoms and degrees of independence. The fact that these assertions include the transference of some of their needs for support, security and intimacy away from the family may make them focal



points in the negotiation of these freedoms. The role of 'serious' relationships in achieving independence may be enhanced by their linkage with preparations to make the physical transition away from the family and family home (Henderson et al., 2007: 138).

Julia Brannen et al. (1994: 180-184) suggest that, in essence, the processes of negotiating revised parent-child relationships in middle-class families are based on parental desires to ensure that their children know that they love them, care about them and understand them. Parents seek to achieve this primarily through communicating and trying to establish open, equitable relationships which have some of the characteristics of friendships. However, while parents may perceive that these relationships both keep open the possibility of allowing young people to exercise their autonomy and enable them to spot 'trouble', young people may view them as attempts to encourage compromising or embarrassing disclosures which can be utilised in controlling them. The extent to which parents are seen as supportive and as a potential resource in relation to their 'serious' relationships is at least partly dependent on where young people locate their interaction along a continuum drawn between these poles of confiding and controlling.

As well as providing some context for understanding how young people's 'serious' relationships can become enmeshed in the negotiation of parent-child relationships this analysis also sheds some light on how these processes may be influencing young people's emotional expectations and enactment of their 'serious' relationships. It has been argued that by attaching importance to, and engaging in, practices of openness and intimacy the family effectively demonstrates what 'proper' adult emotional

intimacy involves and that it shapes young people's expectations that their 'serious' relationships should have disclosure and emotional reciprocity at their core if they are to attain this status (Jamieson, 1999: 68).

Finally, these analyses provide some leverage on understanding what lies behind some of the variability in the interview data in terms of the attitudes young people held towards their families and the degree of influence that they perceived them to have over their experiences of 'serious' relationships. By recognising that young people's 'serious' relationships are elements of broader negotiative processes about autonomy, independence and control it becomes clear that their accounts of familial influence on them are not transparent but inflected by their views and experiences of these processes. The ambivalence that both young people and parents feel about 'openness' within the family can be seen as percolating through the interviews and it becomes clear that, as they talked to me, young people were working out positions in relation to the potentially contradictory pressures that they were under. On the one hand, to demonstrate that their relationships with their parents conformed to a normative discourse about the association between parent-child intimacy and maturity and adulthood and, on the other, to demonstrate that they were able to protect themselves against the potentially intrusive dimensions that they detected, adhered to these practices (Warin et al., 1999: 37).

In concluding this foray into research on the issue of parent-adolescent relationships in middle-class families it is important to note that, while confiding talk and intimacy holds a dominant and privileged position within discourses about what represents a 'good' parent-child relationship, there is evidence that alternative strategies are

available to families to negotiate young people's autonomy and dependence. In particular, opting for mutually agreed silence rather than an intensified dialogue can also be a successful and satisfying negotiating strategy for both parents and young people as this can be understood as reflecting respect for privacy and autonomy (Jamieson, 1998: 73).

### **Familial support and control of young people's 'serious' relationships**

In the next two sections of this chapter I aim to explore first how young people perceived their 'serious' relationships as being influenced by the ways that families acknowledged and accommodated them, and second how they perceived their families sought to control or constrain these relationships. In both cases young people perceived that the main means through which their parents sought to exercise influence over their 'serious' relationships was by trying to remain on open and intimate terms with them. Establishing and maintaining lines of communication was seen as providing a context in which talk about their 'serious' relationships could take place. In the main, interviewees suggested that these interactions were fairly short and conversational in tone, and for many a rare occurrence. This was the case whether their parents or other family members were expressing approval, signalling their availability to talk or expressing reservations. These young people felt that generally they tended neither actively to raise the issue of 'serious' relationships nor to seek to engage them in intense discussion, but rather to seize upon the subject opportunistically.



*Familial support and endorsement for young people's 'serious' relationships*

First then I will examine some of the ways that young people talked about parents signalling their approval and endorsing their 'serious' relationships. As I suggested above, this was achieved principally through talk but, as I will illustrate, interviewees also referred to a variety of forms of practical familial engagement and involvement with their 'serious' relationships which was not only interpreted as endorsing but could influence how these relationships were enacted and experienced.

This extract from my second interview with Scott, arising from me asking how his family had reacted to his relationship, illustrates the characteristic tenor of exchanges between young people and their parents.

Scott: I think they quite like it. They like my girlfriend.

SF: Do they?

Scott: Well (.) we don't talk about it much. I mean it's not something they like, bring up really. But if I wanted to ask them for advice or anything I know that they'd help me, you know, give me advice and that. They're always really nice to her when she comes round too.

SF: So can you think of an occasion when you have talked about it and what they said?

Scott: Well, it's more like just something that comes up sometimes. Just maybe dad will ask me if, when I am seeing her again. Like I'll talk to him, (.)if the football's on I'll watch it with

him downstairs and we'll talk about it then maybe. Just like 'How's it going?' and that.

**SF:** Is it mainly your dad then that you talk to?

**Scott:** No, not really. It's always been like, it's always been like, like he'd more do things with me...it's more, more personal with my mum. I mean I am close to them both but it's more like out of the, out of the house erm with him, but my mum, eh I'm close to her in the house.

**SF:** And what kinds of things has she said to you?

**Scott:** Just like if I ever had a problem or wanted to talk to her about my relationships that I could.

Scott's account was typical of the modest but important ways that young people felt that their families acknowledged and signalled that they were broadly supportive of their 'serious' relationships. As his account demonstrates simply being available as a source of advice if it were needed, signalled to Scott by the occasional remarks of the kind made by his father as they watched television together, and the sense that one's parents 'liked' one's girlfriend or boyfriend, were often regarded as sufficient and appropriate levels of positive endorsement and support. There were actually very few instances where young people reported either responding to these parental gambits or instigating in-depth discussion. These tended to occur either when some aspect of their 'serious' relationship was troubling them and they wanted to vent their feelings or seek the point of view which they felt confident was underpinned by unconditional love and concern for their well-being. This is very evident in Lynsey's account below, in which she describes asking her mother for a view about her boyfriend's

decision to 'go travelling' for several months. Lynsey had begun by telling me about how she struggled at the time to reconcile her boyfriend's decision to leave with his statements about his emotional commitment and mentioned that she turned to her mother for advice.

**Lynsey:** So I said to mum actually about it.

**SF:** Did you?

**Lynsey:** Yes. I felt (.) unsure, you know, about how he could go away for three months if he really felt that strongly about me and about our relationship. He'd said he wouldn't go if I didn't want him to but I knew he really wanted to go so I couldn't really say no.

**SF:** Did you tell your mum this?

**Lynsey:** Yes. I said I just felt not that I didn't trust him but, I don't know, kind of confused and bit upset. She said it would be best maybe to just let things work themselves out. You know, to see if we stayed in touch and how we felt when he got back. I know she was right and I'd been thinking that myself but it was good to hear from someone else. And your mother's a good person because she's older, more experienced and you know she's thinking of what's best for you.

Of course, parental actions spoke as eloquently as words. Including and involving girlfriends and boyfriends within everyday family life was seen by young people as



acknowledgement of their 'serious' relationships. Where engagement with family went beyond this to include, for example, being invited to join holidays, trips and outings, and to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries, young people felt that their relationships were receiving positive endorsement. Ultimately, this might include promoting them to a similar status to that held by other 'serious' relationships within the family. However, the means by which this was achieved varied from case to case and the extent to which this endorsement was temporary or more lasting was not always clear. Stephen's account of his involvement with other male members of his family in cooking a dinner for Valentine's Day (cited in Chapter Six) provides an example of this. It is evident that this event had symbolic importance for Stephen in terms of representing familial acknowledgement of the emotional significance of his relationship with his girlfriend. However, it is less clear whether the equality it achieved with the relationship between his parents, and the relationship between his brother and his brother's girlfriend was enduring, or framed and limited by the cultural conventions of this event which permits relationships of many different kinds of emotional intensity to be celebrated. This contrasts with Angus' account of what appears to be a much more substantive form of familial recognition of his relationship with his girlfriend through allowing them to alternate their residency between their family homes. By doing so both families seem to be accepting that their relationship is akin to an 'adult' 'serious' relationship although of course embracing the couple within the family homes may also have enabled them to achieve levels of surveillance far beyond that which would have been available in cases where girlfriends and boyfriends were visitors. Central to this endorsement would seem to be the acceptance that Angus' relationship had a sexual dimension. This was the case for many young people but few gave accounts in which this was so

evidently made known to their parents and potentially introduced into negotiations about their autonomy in the context of their 'serious' relationships. Although Angus does not refer to the sexual dimension of this relationship directly in the extract from our second interview cited below, elsewhere he made it plain that it was recognised by both families when he talked about the supportive discussions they had entered into at a time when his girlfriend thought that she was pregnant. Angus' account proceeds through describing his living arrangements to explaining how such an intense involvement in his girlfriend's family has been bound up with the development of a close relationship with her father. This process of getting to know one's girlfriend's or boyfriend's parents was important to young people (whether they had achieved a level of acceptance of their relationship similar to that experienced by Angus or not) since liking and being liked by members of one's partner's families was perceived to represent a level of acknowledgement of the relationship as 'serious'.

Angus:            Yeah. Getting on fine with them. It's, (.) I stay at her, she, we take, (.) she stays at my bit one week and then we just arrange it I'm back at her bit the next (.) erm and I've got really, really close to her dad. We play golf maybe one time a week or whenever we can get the time, because her dad wanted a son but he ended up with three, three girls, so he's got nobody to kind of play football with or do things he maybe wanted to do with a son so I'll just step in.

In addition, to providing de facto approval, the sense of 'belonging' created by forming relationships with a partner's family was perceived by some young people as countering their concerns about becoming too inward looking when involved in 'serious' relationships. For example, Doug noted how he felt that involvement with his girlfriend's family had improved the quality of their relationship.

Doug: We do a lot of er things with each other's family and it's just really, really strong. It's like (.) with me and my last girlfriend, we would maybe just go to the pictures on special occasions and go for a meal and maybe just sitting about watching a DVD every night, but now it's more flexible. We go out still but also we're more in the family kind of thing. It makes me feel not just two of us like too close, but keeping in with other people and not losing those networks and connections. In fact, it's meant I've like got more with her and my family and that.

In addition to offering an opportunity to form emotional attachments within a partner's family, spending time in the household could also present an opportunity to observe the interaction of one's partner with their parents. These interactions could be interpreted as indicative of their emotional maturity, competency and capacity to 'do' a 'serious' relationship as this extract from my first interview with Angie illustrates. Her boyfriend's interaction with his parents reinforced her impression that he was emotionally immature and lent weight to her feeling that their relationship



would not work out. This emerged as I asked Angie whether she knew her boyfriend's family.

Angie: Oh, I've met his parents, but he doesn't, he's horrible to his parents, he's really immature, I think, when it comes to his parents.

SF: Ok.

Angie: He acts the way I used to treat my parents when I was 15.

SF: Have you said anything to him about the way he treats his parents then?

Angie: Uh huh. I said the way he spoke to his mum the other day, I said, 'Don't speak to your mum like that! What, you can't talk to her like that!' He's like, 'Oh it's fine.' I was like, I was shocked, the way he speaks to his parents. I couldn't believe it. It just seemed so immature.

### *Familial disapproval and attempts to exercise control over young people's 'serious' relationships*

Having focused thus far on familial communication around young people's 'serious' relationships and other means by which they were perceived to acknowledge, accept and support them, I want now to turn to cases where young people detected disapproval and that parents were attempting to constrain or limit these relationships. It is important to note that accounts of experiences of these forms of familial influence were much less common in the interview data than accounts of positive acknowledgement and support. In fact, only four interviewees felt that they had ever

detected parental disapproval or reservations about their relationships. As Julie's account of her parents' and grandmother's reaction to her relationship with her boyfriend illustrates, the main means through which parents and other family members made their feelings known was talk rather than, for example, taking practical measures to limit or bar these relationships. It was in the context of talking about the pressure placed on her relationship with her current boyfriend by competing commitments to school and a variety of artistic activities that Julie told me about comments that both her parents and grandmother had made.

**Julie:** Em, with school and dancing and work and Mark, I don't have much time. Like, my mum and dad think that as well. Just need to give something up and, like, I know that they think I should be giving Mark up for a wee while, 'cos I can't give anything else up, I can't give school up obviously, em and dance, I need to do as much as possible. So I don't really think that will be it like, my gran is always, like, 'You should give that boyfriend a rest for a wee while', but I don't want to.

**SF:** She says that as well?

**Julie:** My gran?

**SF:** Yeah. And what does she think about him?

**Julie:** [Uhuh] Uhuh. She really likes him. She just thinks I should be concentrating on me; it's different when you, em, you know that you probably should but you just don't want to.

What seems to be distinctive about this account is that Julie describes the disapproval of her parents and grandmother as rather temperately expressed – she does not perceive that they want her to end her relationship with her boyfriend but either to suspend it or give it less priority at this time. Julie emphasises that her family likes her boyfriend, suggesting that their objections to the relationship are not personal – it is the way that Julie’s emotional investment may be diverting her from her studies that concerns them. Julie seems, towards the end of this extract, to be signalling that she both understands and has some sympathy with this view but that her feelings prevent her from acting on their advice. The tension she sets up between the rational and reasonable proposal made by members of her family and the demands of her feelings towards her boyfriend are expressed even more clearly later in the interview when she says:

Julie: Well, I feel like we’ve got to set times to see each other. Well, really, I need to set times to see each other. That’s what my parents would like me to do. Erm which is kinda not fair, but, like, I understand they’re right. But if he’s out with his friends and I say ‘Oh, you can come round for two hours ‘cos mum and dad are not in’ ((laughs)) or, I’ve got this tiny space, he’s like, ‘Ok I’ll come round just now’. Sometimes I just want to see him so badly that I’ll do that.

There were several accounts of this kind where familial attempts to constrain a young person’s ‘serious’ relationship were expressed primarily in terms of reasonable reservations and invitations to young people to weigh the degree of emotional



commitment and investment that they put into their relationship against the demands placed on them by their educational and career plans. In one or two cases this was linked to other arguments which deployed discourses altogether less resonant with, and acceptable to, the concerns of young people. For example, Hayley suggested that in issuing substantively the same advice as was given to Julie, her parents also introduced the idea that she was 'too young and inexperienced' to make a judgement about whether her relationship with her boyfriend was 'serious' enough to warrant the time and commitment that she gave to it. Honore and Hazel, who participated in a joint interview, said that they felt that their parents turned their 'serious' relationships into issues of trust and, while they understood their parents' concerns, they felt that the undertone was disrespectful. In particular, they felt that parents tended to think young people, and especially young women were easily led astray by their feelings and their vulnerability to predatory young men increased as a consequence. While both Honore and Hazel accepted that emotional involvement did carry risks, including being exploited sexually, they felt that they were able to 'look after themselves', and make judgements about their behaviour arguing, in addition, that in terms of relationships they needed to be given the opportunity to 'make some mistakes' and 'to learn from them'.

Honore: I think my parents don't mind who I go out with but I always feel they're anxious underneath, if you know.

Hazel: Yeah mine too. I think that they worried I'd get in too deep, emotionally, and maybe some boy would take advantage.

Honore: Basically (.) They're worried about girls getting pregnant, basically. I know it happens, but you know you can look after

yourself and you're the one in those situations. I think that they just need to let you learn for yourself and if that means making a few mistakes, well.

Hazel: And not just in terms of sleeping with someone, if you have relationships you're going to hurt sometimes, everyone does, but that's not a reason not to do it.

*Familial support and control of young people's 'serious' relationships: Some concluding comments and considerations*

I want to draw to a conclusion this consideration of how familial reactions and responses to 'serious' relationships are perceived by young people with some comments about a number of issues which cross-cut the interview data. First, it is evident that for young people the influence of the family is experienced primarily through their relationship and interaction with their parents. Although grandparents and siblings are present in some accounts they are usually given much more peripheral roles. This perhaps reflects the particular importance attached to parents both as principal carers and sources of emotional support in young people's lives, the specific significance and character of the parent-child relationship during late adolescence and, of course, the fact that, in accordance with cultural norms and understandings of the law, parents are seen by young people and other members of the family as having special responsibility for, and rights over, their children's behaviour.

Second, the main vectors through which parents express and exercise both approval and concern about young people's 'serious' relationships are talk and the extent to

which they embrace and include young people's partners in family life. According to young people's accounts the chief feature of parental communication about 'serious' relationships is its modest quantity and measured tone. Even where parents and other family members expressed reservations about young people's 'serious' relationships this was generally done calmly and gently and in ways to which they were responsive. However, in some cases young people were less responsive when they felt that parents overstepped the mark implying that they either lacked maturity, judgement or the capacity to identify potential risks inherent in engaging in 'serious' relationships.

As two of the interviewees suggested, the formulation of parental reservations in terms of a discourse which configured commitment to a 'serious' relationship as in tension with furthering one's education and through it career, had particular resonance. Although not referred to explicitly by other interviewees it is possible that this discursive construction might have particular relevance to these young people at this time as they faced public examinations and, for the most part, were making plans to enter higher education. They, as much as their parents, were aware that, despite the intensity of their feelings and degree of investment in their 'serious' relationships, the transition to university and the store they set by establishing themselves in professional careers made maintaining a satisfactory balance between relationships 'in the now' and ambitions 'in the future' improbable. No doubt other discourses would be salient and be well received by these young people at other times and quite different concerns be focal and relevant for other young people with different aspirations.



Third, it is very striking, especially with regard to the accounts of parental expressions of reservations about young people's 'serious' relationships, how the interview data suggest that familial negotiations on this issue are inflected by assumptions about gender differences. As Honore's and Hazel's accounts of their parents' perceptions of the risks attendant on 'serious' relationships suggest, the female gender is seen as a risk factor in itself. Young women are perceived to be particularly vulnerable to becoming too emotionally committed within 'serious' relationships. This commitment is linked by some parents to increased risks of unwanted and adverse outcomes of sexual behaviour using the implicit argument that love limits young women's ability to resist young men's sexual predation. It is evident that, in deploying gender in this way, parents may stimulate resistance among some young women. Both Hazel and Honore seem to be actively involved in negotiating feminine identities which both preserve the forms of emotional relationship dictated by dynamics within heterosexual relationships and also allow them to incorporate aspects of the self which they envisage being forged through other means including their academic achievement and entry to professions.

Gender is also present in these interview data in terms of which family members seem to be taking the lead on communicating with young people about their 'serious' relationships. In line with other research it seems that within these families, mothers are more likely than fathers to take the lead on discussion with their children especially when these involve emotional issues (Brannen et al., 1994: 186-190). However, it is important not to oversimplify these relationships or their dynamics. As Scott's and, especially, Angus' accounts demonstrate, male relationships are important to young people and are not necessarily perceived, in these cases by young

men, to be lacking in either emotional depth or understanding. Certainly, research undertaken with fathers, suggests that they place emotional involvement with their children at the centre of their constructions of fatherhood and may be particularly sensitive to the emotional needs of their children around points of transition in late adolescence (Galasinski, 2004: 99-118). In terms of the quality of parent-child relationships the issue seems to be that paternal involvement and investment in young people's lives is both enacted and understood in different ways to that of mothers.

### **The influence of parental relationships**

As well as identifying parent-child interaction as influential on their 'serious' relationships, young people also described relationships between their parents as points of reference or orientation for their experiences. The nature of this influence was described by young people, in general terms, as fairly direct. If one's parents had a stable, enduring and loving relationship this provided an attractive and appealing model for one's own ambitions in terms of 'serious' relationships. The cultural ideal of a trajectory from love, through a 'serious' relationship and into marriage was constructed as a personal ideal or into canonical narratives. In contrast, if the parental relationship had broken down then young people were chary of forming a 'serious' relationship, cautious about falling in love and more cynical about marriage. This view was one that young people who participated in group discussion developed as they debated a range of influences on their views about 'serious' relationships.

Andrew: I think you kinda pick up from your parents' relationship. I mean if you see them being in love and them being together for you know, twenty years, you

think 'well that's what I've got... that's what I've got to have, or I want.' Or that you see yourself in that perfect relationship, 'that's what I want.'

**SF:** **OK. So it's a pattern or a model for it?**

**Shirley:** Yeah.

**Jamie:** Or they get divorced and you become quite cynical. You're kinda like 'right, that's that, I'm not doing that.'

**Andrew:** And then you see that and that's why you don't want to fall in love because you don't want that to happen to you. You don't wanna get married because it might all go wrong.

The substance of this view was indeed reflected in individual accounts of the influence of parental relationships on young people's views and experiences of 'serious' relationships but the generalities were worked through and nuanced by the context of the complexities of young people's personal experience. This was most evident in the case of the two young women who had experienced breakdowns in their parents' relationships. For both of them it was not just the integrity of the ideal of 'a serious' relationship that had been damaged but, they perceived, their capacity and confidence to form stable and trusting relationships. This was particularly evident in Stephanie's account. She felt that the separation of her parents had left her bereft of male affection (her father had left the family) and that as a consequence she was too easily drawn into emotional commitments with her boyfriends seeking through them to find the male affection and affirmation that was lacking in her



relationship with her father. She described how she had realised this as she tried to understand her ongoing attachment to a boyfriend who she thought was ‘two-timing’ her.

Stephanie: My mum and dad split up and it was, my dad had an affair (.) so I didn’t really (.) I’ve never had a father figure or a guy that has told me he loved me and all this stuff, and then he [her boyfriend] came along. He told me that I was like ‘Ah!’ Fell for him. ((laughing)). So I fell for him naturally.

Stephanie: I’ve never really been shown how a girl should be treated. My dad left, mum and me and that’s how ((laughs)) I fall into bad relationships all the time. I’m like, I’m like (.) the most sucker when it comes to that, I’m so bad.

It is important to note that Angie, the other young woman whose parents’ relationship had broken down and ended in divorce, did not perceive the breakdown in her parent’s relationship as so influential on her emotional development and needs. Although the general principle articulated within Stephanie’s account was present – that the breakdown in her parents’ relationship had instilled in her some caution and cynicism about love – Angie was not so fatalistic about its impact on her experiences.

These subtle differences in the views of these two young women alert us to the complexity and potential difficulties in inferring direct links between family structures and either the quality of parent–child relationships or their influence on young people’s ‘serious’ relationships. On the one hand, there is some evidence that young people are more optimistic about and secure in their ‘serious’ relationships when they report that the relationship between their parents is ‘high quality...loving, supportive, caring, playful, trusting, close and passionate’ marital conflict, separation and divorce do not necessarily have a negative impact on their experiences (Gray and Steinberg, 1999: 248; Hazan and Shaver, 1987). However, how this relationship is mediated is relatively poorly understood. The age at which parental separation occurs, the degree of acrimony that it involves, the financial and social hardships faced by the family prior to separation and the gender of the young people involved may all be important determinants of outcomes for young people’s future personal relationships (Kiernan, 1997; Kiernan and Hobcraft, 1997; Kiernan and Cherlin, 1999; Furstenberg and Kiernan, 2001). Similarly Bren Neale and Jennifer Flowerdew (2006) suggest that the breakdown of parental relationships may mean that young people carry a legacy of doubt and vulnerability into their future relationships but it is important to de-centre parental separation from an understanding of young people’s experiences and to focus instead on the numerous implications that it has and the potential of each of these to be associated with positive or negative experiences. Neale and Flowerdew suggest that young people’s construction of post-separation and divorce kinship, sibling relationships and residency arrangements are all important to understanding the influence of parental separation on young people’s views and expectations of their ‘serious’ relationships. As Sheila Henderson et al. (2007:126) have demonstrated, young people can find that parental happiness with

new partners and having two homes and two sets of family resources on which to draw is a positive outcome of parental separation and divorce.

It is also worth noting that it was not only breakdowns in parental relationships that were assigned such a potentially powerful degree of influence over young people's experiences of their 'serious' relationships but also processes of reconstituting families. For example, Hayley recalled that when she was very young there had been a great deal of friction between her sister and her father and this had caused arguments between her parents. Hayley felt strongly that her memories of hearing them arguing was the basis for her anxieties about potential disagreements with her boyfriend.

Hayley: Erm, me and my big sister have different dads so my big sister's dad left my mum when she was a baby so erm, and then my dad came on the scene and they had me, and my big sister just went crazy. She went wild and mum and my dad always fought all the time and it affected me a lot. And when people argue I just hate it. I have to walk away from it.

SF: °[ok] ° You remember the fights?

Hayley: [I d]o remember, yeah. And I was only young, two or three. I still remember arguments and stuff and doors getting slammed and whatever... and my mum and dad argued in the house. I hated it. I was always scared that they'd split up. It was always a fear of mine. I don't know, it's just, even now, even though I'm getting older I still fear that. And I think it's affected my



relationship too because I hate to argue in case we break up. I couldn't bear that.

Of course it is significant here, as Hayley indicates, that her family is reconstituted and she and her older sister have different fathers. Although it is possible that differences, disagreements and arguments between parents might occur in any family and raise concerns for young people about the quality and stability of that relationship, they have a special significance for Hayley given the history of her family. However, a similar point was made by other interviewees about parental friction although it necessarily attached to other circumstances – these included problems with money, work and wider family relationships.

In mounting analysis of both Stephanie's and Hayley's accounts I am focusing on those aspects which are most pertinent to my current argument and do not want to downplay other ways in which they may have significance or be involved in processes of negotiating relationships within their respective families. For example, from other parts of my interviews with Stephanie it was apparent that she was angry with her father for being absent from her life and abandoning her mother and that her feelings towards him were ambivalent. My interviews with Hayley were less revealing about what other emotional dynamics may have been constellating around her father's role, however, it was clear that both these young women attempted to construct and manage the difficulties that they experienced in their relationships with their boyfriends at the time of the interviews in relation to earlier experiences within their families. Moreover, it alerts us to the possibility that these processes were taking place for other young people even when they did not establish such explicit

links between childhood experiences and understandings of their current emotions and relationships.

Both these accounts can be compared and contrasted with that of Stephen, below. Stephen described his parent's relationship as stable, happy and loving. However, this was not the only, or at this time, most influential aspect of it in terms of his own 'serious' relationship. Feeling anxious about the imminent move to university and maintaining his relationship with his girlfriend, he mentioned his concerns to his mother who explained that her relationship with his father had survived a period of enforced separation. Surprised and intrigued by this discovery he asked to read through some of their correspondence which his mother had stored in the loft.

Stephen: She was like well me and my dad, well me and, her and my dad em had the same sort of thing 'cos my mum, my mum went away to Inverness and my dad was in Glasgow and a bank keeper there 'cos my mum went away to Inverness to do ah, a cooking, hospitality course and they were writing letters every day 'cos they didn't have mobile phones em, so they were writing letters every day, see all the letters that they've got, they've got like stacks and stacks of letters and there were just, they lasted, I don't know, I think it was two years that my mum was away em, if they, if they can last two years and be married for 25 years then I think I can last well two, three, four years however long it will be. It made me realise that if they

could survive that time apart then me and my girlfriend could do it too.

One striking aspect of all three of these accounts is how young people draw on specific aspects of parental relationships which seem most pertinent and useful to understanding and negotiating ways through current concerns about their 'serious' relationships. This suggests that it should be anticipated that what is perceived to be relevant at one time may not necessarily be so in the future or have been so in the past, and that what may mediate these choices and quite possibly the interpretation laid on these aspects of relationships between parents, is contingent on the nature of personal experiences and particularly those aspects of this experience which seem to be problematic or produce anxiety.

In addition, both Stephanie's and Hayley's accounts strongly imply that they perceive that parental relationships can be influential at a 'deep' level. Although the data do not permit a categorical statement about whether this formulation of the vector and nature of influence is gendered I would suggest that it may be. It could be argued, for example, that for young women experiencing and/or accounting for relationship troubles in these terms reflects the limitations of discursive positions available to them through which to negotiate heterosexual femininity and emotion. Referring to current difficulties as the results of childhood experiences seems congruent with the assumption that women are more emotionally empathetic and affected by the feelings of others than men. Their reluctance to allot responsibility for their troubling feelings to the young men with whom they are in 'serious' relationships and instead to locate them inside themselves and the historic dynamics



of their family, can be linked to women's attempts to understand and manage their subordination to male power by working within a construct of femininity as emotionally cognisant, responsible and responsive and defined more in relation to others than the self (Chodorow, 1978).

### **Family crisis and trauma as influences on 'serious' relationships**

Finally I want to turn to those young people's accounts which refer to particular moments of family life which were perceived to be generative of their emotional capacities and vulnerabilities with regard to their 'serious' relationships. In a sense I have already touched on issues of this kind via young people's accounts of the breakdown and re-forming of their families but my purpose here is to add to this category of experiences by illustrating that a wider range of 'family troubles' was perceived to be important in shaping experiences of 'serious' relationships. In addition to Stephanie and Hayley, four other interviewees gave examples of these 'family troubles' during the interviews.

What young people tended to foreground in these accounts were what can be termed as 'critical events' (Henderson et al., 2007: 21). I am intentionally borrowing this term from the work of Sheila Henderson et al., (2007) not only because the kinds of events referred to by the young people participating in this study fit within the categorisation that they provide – 'moving (house, school, town, country); illness and bereavement; and events associated with the education system both formal (exams, changing schools) and informal (bullying, relationship with teachers)' – but because, as they suggest, young people drew attention to these events as leaving a mark on them and their lives. By definition these 'critical events' were not routine or regular

occurrences but moments at which emotions were exposed, keenly felt and the part of the focus of family attention. In a number of accounts, focusing on quite different kinds of crisis, the main theme seemed to be that working through trauma instilled a commitment to achieving and maintaining emotional openness and empathy in the context of subsequent 'serious' relationships. For example, Ross talked about intervening to stop the bullying of his younger brother. He had empathised with his sibling's feelings of isolation and vulnerability and, partly because he perceived that these had been amplified by trying to conceal the victimisation, his commitment to creating the conditions for intimacy and disclosure within his 'serious' relationships had been reinforced. Lynsey talked about her experiences of recovering from an eating disorder. She had been attempting to conceal her problems and her family's response, although initially angry, had a similar result in terms of the increasing importance that she attached to disclosure and empathy in her relationship with her boyfriend.

Lynsey: Well I just totally like I stopped eating apart from, like I'd eat a tiny wee bit for my dinner, 'cause it was like, that was a family meal you kind of had to eat then, but my brother noticed it em, he was like, because I used to pack my own lunch, he was like 'Lynsey, what you got in there for your lunch?' I didn't have anything 'Erm why?' he was like 'No Lynsey, let's see' and my mum was like 'Uh-huh what have you put in 'cause I've noticed that there like, there's the same amount of rolls, you know like for the last three weeks...what are you eating?' and I was like 'Erm, what?' And then they

went mental, like my brothers were really annoyed with me and then my mum and dad were talking to me and stuff and we just kind of talked through it.

**SF:**           **You said they told you off?**

**Lynsey:**       **Yeah, yeah**

**SF:**           **For, for not eating?**

**Lynsey:**       They were mad at me for not eating. My brothers were, mum and dad were obviously more worried and my brothers were like that 'Why would you do that, it's so stupid'. Erm but there's photos, my mum's been doing my brother's photo album for his 21<sup>st</sup> and mum we're looking through photos and I was like, when I wasn't eating and it's just absolutely minging but no one really noticed until they noticed that I wasn't eating.

**SF:**           **But it worked out in the end?**

**Lynsey:**       Yeah, because they were angry, well worried I suppose and probably feeling like they should have known. But then we talked about it and why I wasn't eating properly and I just got better. It made us really close actually. It has had a really big impact on me too because I know how I felt keeping it secret and how much better it was to talk about things and we always have ever since. I would never let anything get to me like that without talking to them. I guess it's why I think it's so important to talk about your feelings. Like with my boyfriend I always said I wouldn't let anything go without being said



because then you can understand someone better and it brings you closer even if it's hard to talk about.

In other accounts a traumatic family event was perceived to be salient to experiences of 'serious' relationships in other ways. Bereavement figured prominently here as an experience through which young people felt drawn closer to their girlfriends and boyfriends and was referred to in detail by two interviewees. Doug's account of the role that his girlfriend played in supporting him through his mother's terminal illness and death serves to illustrate the point.

Doug: Erm three or four years ago, 2002, erm my mum died of breast cancer, which was, you know, a bit devastating. I'd just kind yeah, no, er got to know Sheila and she was there and (..) she's almost erm (..) filled in a feminine gap in my life and I, I really respect her for that and I think she enjoys being, like, the lead female in my life, so to speak, and it's just something that over time has worked out as, you know, the admiration, you know, feelings that I have for her kind of snowballed. As a consequence erm I trust her completely.

Not only had this experience brought them closer at the time that Doug had been bereaved, but later when his girlfriend lost a close relative he felt that his experiences enabled him to empathise more closely with her and to be more supportive. As he concludes, these shared experiences and the important role that they have played in each other's lives at these times have intensified their feelings for each other.

Doug: You know, erm (.) she was (..) she was told by her mum, like, er 'Rab's going to die', but you know, nothing can prepare you for that, you know, and she was devastated and we've been up to (.) where his ashes were scattered, and what not, er (.) scattered, and you know it's, (..) it feels like I (.) can (..) almost we can empathise with each other 'cos we've both (.) sort of gone through the same thing and both had to, you know, be there for each other, which has been (.) been made things much easier, and I think through both of those er occasions, you know, a new-found fondness and respect has er (.) kind of (..) er been there.

These accounts share some of the characteristics of young people's descriptions of the ways that aspects of their parents' relationship influence their 'serious' relationships in that emotional experiences of the past are being recruited in order to help understand and explain aspects of their present emotional identity and the nature of their commitment to their partners. It may also suggest that supportive sharing within the family can lead to stronger positive feeling and/or desire for commitment in 'serious' relationships.

### **Summary and conclusions**

In this chapter I have explored the 'family' as an influence on young people's views and experiences of 'serious' relationships. Using the data from interviews with individual young people and small group discussions I have described the

characteristic forms and trajectories through which young people perceive that this influence is exercised and some of the ways that it impacts on their expectations, experiences and the practices of their 'serious' relationships. I have located my analyses within research on the characteristics of parent–child relationships in late adolescence arguing the dynamics around negotiating young people's autonomy and dependence, and navigation of a mutually satisfactory means of maintaining open channels of communication, can be seen to be inflecting their accounts. This research also helps to explain some of the particular ways that young people's 'serious' relationships become enmeshed in their interactions with their parents and other family members.

I have demonstrated that the data are strongly suggestive that most of these young people experience their families as accepting and/or endorsing their 'serious' relationships. The forms of interaction through which this is expressed and detected are often modest and involve everyday interaction as well communication on the specific subject of young people's 'serious' relationships. It is, in fact, notable that even in families where young people perceive that they routinely engage in a very low level of disclosing intimacy with their parents, they can have a strong sense of whether their relationship is approved of and perceive that their parents are available to them as a support to 'talk things through' if needs be. This suggests that parental influence over young people's 'serious' relationships can be realised by a variety of means. For example, while some young people, such as Angus, characterised their family interaction on the subject of their 'serious' relationships as minimal, in fact, by referring to their parents as allowing them to 'do what I want', they were indicating that they interpreted parental silence on the issue as indicative that their



parents regarded these matters as entirely private and/or that they did not represent conduct which transgressed parental views on the limits of autonomy.

Only a few interviewees, all of whom were young women, felt that their families had sought to constrain their 'serious' relationships. These young women were receptive to parental arguments which focused on the tension between their commitment to 'serious' relationship and the demands of schooling and career ambitions although, in at least one case, they seemed to be ambivalent about adopting their parents' advice. No young men referred to feeling constrained or subject to parental reservations about their 'serious' relationships.

The young people who participated in this study also perceived that their expectations and enactment of their 'serious' relationships were highly influenced by their perceptions and experiences of their parents' relationships. Parental relationships were regarded both as potent models and also as creating expectations and shaping young people's emotional capacities and needs. In addition, in some families, emotionally charged events of other kinds were perceived as influential. For some young people, coping with problems of their own or being faced by other members of the family resulted in them feeling a heightened degree of emotional empathy and as a consequence they attached much importance to emotional intimacy, and creating and maintaining the conditions for mutual disclosure within their 'serious' relationships.

I have also argued that young people's sense of their families' biography is important in understanding not only their current parent-child relationships but also how it

influences their 'serious' relationships. Although family structure is also important, it is not the structure *per se* which matters but the problems and possibilities it produces for young people's understanding and shaping of their present and future emotional and relational experiences. These data suggest that for some young people parental separation is a particularly significant event in these processes.

In conclusion, these arguments suggest that in important ways the meanings and practices that constitute young people's serious relationships are made and remade via their interactions with parents in the context of everyday family life in the home and in relation to the examples provided by parental relationships and significant moments in family history. As the data cited here illustrate, young people's 'serious' relationships are not solely constituted within the interpersonal space of their 'couple' on which the 'family' has an influence as some exterior force but are part of, and constituted through, relations with specific others in the family circle.

## **Chapter Nine: Conclusion**

In this thesis I have given an account of what it means to be young and in love for a particular group of young people at a particular point in their lives. In this concluding chapter I want to return to the central research questions which I posed in my introduction, and in the context of summarising the findings of the study, demonstrate how I have addressed each of them.

The first question that I posed was what array of social-cultural influences are pertinent to understanding these young people's experiences of love and 'serious' relationships? In Chapters One and Two, where I reviewed the sociological literature on emotions in general and love in particular, I argued that sociological approaches to the study of emotion conceive of them as being inseparable from the social and cultural contexts in which they occur. I showed that this context is generally viewed as involving an array of elements or dimensions which can be thought of as operating through a model in which the myriad of local micro-cultural interactions make and remake macro-social relations even as the latter shape and limit the former (Averill, 1985; Jackson, 1993; Lutz and White, 1986). I demonstrated that at a fundamental level this proposition was shared by sociologists whether they occupied weaker or stronger constructionist positions on the extent to which they saw these influences as constitutive of emotions.

I showed that in relation to this thesis love could be conceptualised as a collection of what has been termed, 'ideals and hopes of personal fulfilment, commitment, companionship and affection' (Jackson 1993: 207) which interact with the conventions of romance, and are connected to the formation and maintenance of



heterosexual identity and the social institutions of couple and marriage. I concluded, therefore, that the central thesis within the sociology of emotion is that people's experiences of love are dependent on and shaped by culture and are historically specific. As such, they are said to be influenced by linguistic repertoires and discourses that lock into companion social discourses. This array of influences is then said to be mediated through the micro-social realm comprising relationships and interactional practices. This structuration is dynamic with the micro- and macro-social realms being made and remade through each other. I used this core argument to organise my approach to analysing and presenting the data that I collected in this study. I opened this account, in Chapters Four and Five, by describing the micro-social context in which the emotional experiences of the young people in the study were situated, in particular in relation to what they termed 'serious' relationships – relationships in which two young people would be 'interested' in each other, engage in mutual emotional investment and even perhaps, as a result, fall in love.

Focusing most closely on the accounts of twenty-five, white, heterosexual, middle-class, Scottish young people aged between 16 and 18 years old, Chapters Four and Five described in detail, their experiences of 'serious' relationships. In these chapters I examined how these relationships were formed and outlined some of social practices through which they were enacted. In the course of these chapters, I argued that such practices were not only vehicles for the expression of the young people's feelings but also shaped and gave meaning to them. For example, I showed that engagement in reciprocal intimate disclosure, where young people talked about themselves, their concerns and worries and their feelings, was a means by which they established their common interests and shared commitment to forming a 'serious'

relationship. In addition, the experience of 'opening up' involved in intimate disclosure was connected to an increasing sense of emotional investment and, for many, an amplification of their feelings for each other.

In Chapters Four and Five I also demonstrated how, in enacting and understanding their experiences of 'serious' relationships, the young people drew on and referred to a wide range of cultural conventions, discourses and narratives about love and intimate relationships. These could be seen as representing one of the overlaying arrays of influences and meanings which were both shaping and being shaped the young people's experiences. In Chapter Four I showed how in forming their 'serious' relationships young people, like Shane for example, sometimes 'staged' the act of 'asking out'. Utilising the conventions associated with the classical romantic 'script', Shane invested the event with particular meaning and emotional intensity (Duncombe and Marsden, 1995; Redman, 1999). However, sometimes – and sometimes within the same accounts – there was evidence that, as well as utilising romantic 'scripts', young people also drew on more 'realist' discourses to account for their relationships and experiences within them (Illouz, 1999). In Chapter Five, for instance, I showed that Angie mobilised the distinctions between various 'scripts' and conventions relating to love and relationships to separate and make meaningful different phases or aspects of her current relationship. In my analysis I explored how she referred to 'realist' 'scripts' to understand and account for times when this relationship was satisfying in sexual and romantic terms but did not involve an emotional investment which might equate with or lead to falling in love. What these and other accounts suggest is that these young people did not see these various forms of 'script' as prescriptive, but resources which could be activated and deployed both



as a means to enact and to account for their relationship experiences. I also showed, however, that these mobilisations did not take place against a value-free background in which any form of relationship was possible. As Jackie Stacey and Lynn Pearce (1995) suggest, despite coming under pressure, the romance narrative and the ideal of love still has high status as the basis for 'serious' relationships.

As I worked through this description of the ways that these young people enacted and experienced their 'serious' relationships I identified three dimensions or aspects of the context in which they took place as particularly influential on their views and experiences. First, I argued that the young people's engagement in 'serious' relationships was negotiated through discourses about gender. As such, the ways that these young people understood gender and, especially differences between femininity and masculinity, could be seen to be influencing the meanings that they attached to their actions, their feelings and the ways that they understood the actions and feelings of their partners. Second, I showed that many of these young people were also referring to experiences within their families as a significant factor shaping their experiences of 'serious' relationships. The 'family' emerged as an important reference point for their conduct, understanding and expectations of their 'serious' relationships; as a source of support and advice; and as a regulatory influence. Finally, I showed that these young people's experiences of transitions, in particular, their transition into the sixth year which had preceded the interviews, and the transition from school to university, work and training, which they were making at time of interviews, represented 'critical moments' at which their views, understanding, experiences and expectations of relationships were renegotiated (Henderson et al. 2007: 21; Thomson et al. 2002). I went on to examine each of these



dimensions or aspects of the context in which these young people's 'serious' relationships took place in turn in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight. It was in these chapters that I addressed in depth the second question that I posed in my introduction to this thesis: How and in what ways are these dimensions of the young people's social context inflecting, influencing or constitutive of their experiences of love and relationships?

In Chapter Six, 'Doing 'serious' relationships and making gender' I argued that the young people involved in this study constructed masculinity and femininity in broadly oppositional terms through some of the discourses which existed within the wider peer group of the sixth year and, furthermore, suggested these reflect the hegemonic position of heterosexual masculinity and its power to shape how gender and gender relations are configured (Holland et al. 1998). I demonstrated that one of the most powerful of these discourses is one that constructs the public 'truths' of young men's interest in sex and young women's interest in love. As Janet Holland et al. demonstrate, these 'truths' can be renegotiated in the 'private' realm of the relationship where young women are able to find a means to express desire and men to show their emotional vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, it remains the case that such renegotiation always take place in relation to the convention that young men want sex and young women want love. In consequence, even when the 'public truths' are renegotiated, they tend to remain contained within the powerful and resilient 'gendered languages of heterosexuality' (Holland et al. 1998:104). In common with the findings of Holland et al., I argued that – through their engagement in 'serious' relationships – the young people in this study had indeed begun to negotiate these

discourses, what Angie referred to as the different places that young women and men were 'coming from' when they formed a 'serious' relationship.

In Chapter Six I showed that these processes of renegotiation involved young people 'learning' about both their own gender and their partners' gendered identities. For example, some young women, like Lynsey, reworked their ideas about the discourse which constructs women as more emotionally 'literate' than men in the light of their experiences of their boyfriends' disclosures to them of their feelings, concerns and worries. Equally, for some young men, like Stephen, their experiences of 'serious' relationships enabled them to understand that young women could experience sexual desire and passion as strongly as young men.

I also demonstrated that these young peoples' renegotiation of hegemonic public discourses about masculinity, femininity, heterosexuality, sex and love in the context of the private realm of their 'serious' relationships fed back into their experiences of the little cultural world of the sixth year peer group. Young people's accounts of this process suggested that gender was not simply remade in any absolute way through 'serious' relationships but that it provided alternative means and positions for 'doing' gender which young people came to see as appropriate to different social contexts and interactions.

In Chapter Seven, 'Love, relationships and the negotiation of transitions' I focused on two transitions associated with these young people's schooling which they suggested were influencing their views, experiences and expectations of 'serious' relationships. First I examined the transition to the sixth year and focused on the

ways that this contributed to the creation of conditions under which the 'serious' relationship emerged as a new form of heterosexual coupledness. I then examined the ways that the process of leaving school, in which these young people were involved at the time when I conducted interviews with them, was leading them to (re)consider their investment in 'serious' relationship and the meanings that they attached to them. I argued that these transitional experiences represented 'critical moments' at which for these young people their thoughts, feelings and views about love and relationships came into focus (Thomson et al. 2002).

In the first part of Chapter Seven I showed that the transition to the sixth year involved a reconfiguration of relationships within the peer group and also contributed to these young people's sense of their increased independence, individuation and what they termed 'maturity'. These were important factors in creating the conditions under which 'serious' relationships could not only arise, but even become, for these young people, desirable. With regard to the transition from school I showed, in the second part of Chapter Seven, that for those young people who were in 'serious' relationships the prospect of moving away from their partner had clarified the depth and intensity of their feelings for them. For example, Stephen, Hayley and Julie had all decided that they wanted to maintain their relationships with their partners and were planning to move away together in order to do so. For other young people, like Doug, this transition was not working out as planned and they saw it as probable that their relationships would come to an end. For Angie, the prospect of leaving school and moving away from home seemed to be leading her to reduce her emotional investment in her relationship with her boyfriend since she saw their relationship as unlikely to survive this transition. For a



another group, including those young people not currently in relationships, the prospect of leaving home for university seemed to offer the opportunity of forming relationships in the future.

In Chapter Eight I turned my attention to the ways that the 'family' was influencing these young people's relationship experiences. I argued that through endorsement and attempts to control or limit their 'serious' relationships, the family could be seen as influencing young people's feelings towards their partners and the level of commitment that they felt towards their relationship with them. For example, I showed how Julie's feelings towards her boyfriend were intensified by her parents' anxieties about the depth of her investment in this relationship and their concerns that she was attaching too much importance to it to the detriment of her education and career plans. I also showed how young people referred to the relationship between their parents as a pattern or model for the conduct of their own relationships. I showed, for example, that Stephen's experiences of finding that his parents had managed a period of living apart due to their work commitments gave him confidence that he could maintain his relationship with his girlfriend through the transition to university. Finally, I showed how young people cited a range of other experiences within their family lives as influential on their views, expectations and experiences of 'serious' relationships. For young people like Doug and Stephanie bereavement and family breakdown figured prominently in their accounts of the experiences that had shaped their emotional needs and also their emotional investment in their 'serious' relationships.

Overall, then, in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight I demonstrated that a range of influences embedded in these young people's lives were shaping their experiences of 'serious' relationships and provided them with repertoires of meanings on which they could draw both to enact and understand their experiences.

I would argue that the account of these young people's experiences of love and relationships that I gave in these chapters provides grounds for making a strong assertion about the strengths of the sociological conceptualisation of emotion. As this account predicts it was indeed the case that these young people's emotional experiences derived their meanings and sense from the specific social-cultural milieu in which they were situated. For example, I have provided robust evidence that the young people's feelings cannot be conceptualised as separable from the social practices through which they enacted. I have also shown that these practices are both influenced by and provide access to means of mobilising a range of discourses and conventions about love and relationships. Moreover, the ways that these are configured and the possibilities for reworking them are dependent, to high degree, on the specific demands and opportunities presented by these young people's little cultural world. On this basis, and for these reasons, I have no hesitation in asserting that the sociology of emotion provides means of understanding emotional experiences and, furthermore, that without taking the socio-cultural into account any understanding of emotional experience would only ever be partial.

In the light of these findings I want now to consider the third question that I posed in the introduction to this thesis: If, and in what ways, do these young people's

experiences exceed the account made possible through the sociology of emotion and, what possibilities and opportunities are there for elaborating this account?

I suggest that there are two respects in which the data reported in this thesis suggest that that a sociological account of emotion might be further elaborated. First, there is the issue of exploring ways of adding to sociological approach which – without superseding it or ignoring its evident strengths – enable it to better account for the diversity of ways that individuals experience and negotiate their emotions ways through the array of socio-cultural influences. Second, there is the issue of accounting for the embodied aspects of emotional experience. Clearly, I do not have to scope to explore these issues in depth here, but I want to acknowledge their importance and also make some tentative suggestions about how the sociological account might begin to take them into consideration.

Through this thesis I have drawn attention the diversity of young people's relationship experiences. With regard to each of the major aspects of context that I have examined – gender, transitions and the 'family' – there was evidence that, although it influenced the young people's 'serious' relationships and the meanings they attached to these, the ways that they experienced and responded to this influence were characterised by a high degree of diversity. For example, the influence of the transition to the sixth year on young people's 'serious' relationships was not experienced in a consistent or uniform way. For some young people, like Gareth, it seemed to be very significant in generating his interest in forming a 'serious' relationship. For others, like Scott, who were already in 'serious' relationships, it was much less so. Similarly, some young people perceived that their experiences of



family life were exercising relatively little influence over their views, expectations and experiences of relationships while others, like Stephanie, saw the family as extremely important in determining what she looked for in relationships with young men and how she experienced those relationships.

What this implies then is that while an account of these young people's experiences of love and relationships formulated from an approach embedded in the sociology of emotions is meaningful, it has limitations. In particular, while it can be used to establish what array of influences might be shaping young people's emotional experiences it cannot account, in full, for how these will be assembled in relation to specific individuals. Furthermore, I want to emphasise that this variability exists not only between individual accounts of emotional experience in terms of what specific aspects of this array are influential and the nature of that influence, but it is also discernable within individual accounts. As these young people shifted from context to context and moment to moment in relating their experiences to me the influences that they referred to altered. For example, I have shown that at one particular moment Stephanie felt most powerfully that it was her experiences of her relationship with her father which were influencing what she looked for in a 'serious' relationship. At another moment when she talked about the formation of a relationship with a young man, it was how her experiences conformed to a conventional 'romantic' script that seemed to be at the forefront of her account and understandings of events.

Throughout this thesis I have acknowledged that some of this diversity may reflect the understandings, positions and accounts of their experiences made available to

young people through the interview process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 18). However, I have also argued that despite these potentially constitutive effects that the data reported here are not simply artefactual, but they relate to real, lived experiences (Epstein and Johnson, 1998: 101). I would argue then, that this issue of accounting for the diversity of young people's experiences of love and relationships begins to push at the limits of a purely sociological account. As I indicated in Chapter Two it is this precise issue, identified from the time that the sub-discipline of sociology of emotion emerged, around which critiques of the sociological view cluster (Craib, 1995; 1997; Duncombe and Marsden, 1996; Hochschild, 1983; Hunsaker, 1983; Kemper, 1978; 1981; Lyon, 1998; Schott, 1979; 1980; Williams and Bendelow, 1996). I also suggested, in the context of reviewing the literature of sociology and emotion, that one way sociologists have responded to this it is to adopt what can be broadly termed interactionist positions, that is, positions which leave some element or elements of emotional experience on the side of the person whether that be in the form of biological, psychological or unconscious traits or properties which might account for this diversity (Galasinski, 2004:3; Bendelow and Williams, 1998; Williams, 2001; Barbalet, 2002; Turner and Stets, 2005; Stets and Turner, 2006). I also pointed out, however, that in order to make such 'interactionist' approaches function it is necessary to do more than simply locate some aspects or dimensions of emotion beyond the socio-cultural realm addressed by social constructionism. Instead, it is necessary to define what those aspects are and to mount an argument for how they interact with the array of social and cultural influences.

It is to this issue that I now want to turn. In doing so I am making some tentative proposals for kinds of empirical and theoretical activity which might be productive in

elaborating the sociology of emotion. As Norman Denzin (2007: 12) has pointed out, one important contribution to progressing the field is further empirical study.

Specifically, Denzin argues for empirical research which adopts a phenomenological approach. In his terms, this involves 'study[ing] lived human emotion from within' reflecting the assumption that there is 'no division between people, their emotion, and the world'. He emphasises that 'emotional phenomena...must be situated by time and place and recorded within the language and meanings of the world being investigated'. Based on this descriptive activity, the essential properties of these phenomena must then be identified and interpreted, what Denzin terms, 'reduction, construction and contextualization' (Denzin, 2007: 6-10).

I would argue that Denzin's proposal is eminently reasonable and, moreover, essential in order to begin to assemble sufficient data to begin to explore the ways that the kinds of variability and diversity that I am laying claim to in young people's accounts of love and relationships may either recur or not recur in other contexts and in relation to the experiences of other young people. For example, it might be productive to enquire into the experiences of love and relationships among young people living in other localities, drawn from other backgrounds and ethnicities, and who are not heterosexual. What array of social influences is pertinent to their experiences of love and relationships, what resources do they mobilise to understand these and what meanings do they give them? Further research organised around these questions would be a way of beginning to understand what if any broader patterns prevail among young people with regard to love and relationships.



I want also to argue for the potential benefits of adopting an approach to empirical research which is grounded in biographical methods. There is certainly tantalising evidence within this study that biography ‘matters’, and that young people draw on their past, current and imagined futures in understanding their experiences of love and relationships. As Sheila Henderson et al. (2007) have shown biographical research can be very useful in identifying the broad trajectories of young people’s experiences, what is common across accounts and how social structures and discourses are mediated by the resources and circumstances made available to specific individuals. As Henderson et al (2007: 30) have suggested the ‘relationship’ is itself a ‘field’ through which young people negotiate their identities. By focusing on young people’s experiences of love within this field over time, and by exploring them in relation to the other ‘fields’ that they identify as significant to their lives, it may be possible to begin to piece together an account of experiences of love and relationships which can be brought into dialogue with the sociological account of emotion.

My third and final proposal can be seen as flowing from my suggestions that this study indicates scope for both more phenomenological and biographic research on young people’s experiences of love and relationships. This proposal is that the sociological account might be brought into dialogue with psychoanalytically-inflected thinking and theory. I want to argue that one potential point of linkage is that both the phenomenological and biographic approaches assume agency on the part of the subject, thereby slotting into the gap I am suggesting the ‘interactionist’ account within the sociology of emotion creates. However, both the phenomenological and biographic approach also raise a question about where that

agency resides in the individual, or perhaps more specifically, how might we theorise some aspects of that agency?

In turning to this task I want now to address the second issue that I raised above, namely, how can the sociological approach to emotions begin to take in consideration the embodied aspects of emotional experiences? As I am suggesting here, the 'interactionist' approach with basis in a 'weaker' form of social constructionism and leaving space for something of the 'side of the person', does seem to hold out the potential for accommodating an understanding of emotion which includes some embodied dimensions or aspects. Currently, however, as some of debates and critiques the sociology of emotions that I described in Chapter Two demonstrate, this project – of developing a fully embodied sociology of emotion – has yet to progress far beyond acknowledging the importance of this issue (Newton, 2003).

I would propose that a bringing a psychoanalytic account of emotion into dialogue with the sociological account might be one potentially productive way of moving this project forward. According to the psychoanalytic account emotions are not simply 'in the body' but in the body/mind. It brings together the social, psychic and somatic in what might be potentially productive fashion. There are a number of possible avenues through which this might be accomplished. First, in the form developed and described by Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2000), a psycho-social approach might deploy the concept of the 'defended subject' in seeking understanding of the particular positions that individuals take up in relation to discourses about emotion. Without elaborating on this particular conceptualisation here, what I want to argue is

that it might offer a mechanism by which to begin to understand some of the diversity in the ways that young people handle, respond to and negotiate the range of social influences which play upon their experiences of love and relationships. In addition, or perhaps alternatively, it may be productive to undertake research which explores love as, at least in part, an unconscious drive. There are indications in the work of Joanne Brown (2002), for example, that this again may be a route to explaining some of the complexities of the ways that the social-cultural plays out at the level of the individual. Work of this kind has yet to be undertaken with young people.

Furthermore, work of this kind might in fact go hand in hand with both the phenomenological and biographical research that I have suggested is warranted. Although, there are serious ontological issues to be considered in doing so, both these approaches seem to me open the door to staging a dialogue with psychoanalytically-informed thought. For example, Henderson et al. write that their biographic approach creates the possibility for 'more social and psychological depth as we explore the dynamic and contradictory processes involved in investment, disinvestment and recognition' (Henderson et al., 2007: 13-14). As they explain, this refers to the ways that young people come to choose what aspects of themselves they place in the foreground of the biographies, what aspects they seem to withdraw from and how both these processes are influenced by the recognition that they receive from others. This might perhaps be fertile ground on which to locate and initiate that dialogue between sociology and psychoanalysis.



Of course, in raising these issues, I also implicitly raise the question of why I did not adopt either a biographical or psycho-social approach in this study. In relation to the former, the answer is to be found in the fact – as I described in Chapter Three – the research did not follow the course that I originally anticipated. I had planned to couple reasonably extensive observational research on the enactment of young people's relationships with some informal and formal interviewing. These methods fitted with what, at the time, I understood to be the imperatives of a sociological approach to the study of emotion and attention to biography did not figure largely within these. In fact, because I did not accomplish my aim of organising my fieldwork in the way that I had originally envisaged it, in the end I relied almost entirely on data generated through interviews. In the course of these I did gather – more or less inadvertently – an array of tantalising biographical information. However, until I had subjected these data to analysis, it did not become apparent how important a resource biography might be to understanding the young people's experiences of love and relationships.

With regard to the adoption of a psychoanalytically-inflected approach this was an interest which emerged during the course of this study but only in the context of working with the sociological literature and in the light of data generated through the fieldwork. I had read some literature which explored psycho-social approaches to theorising emotion but had not systematically applied it to the question of how individuals might negotiate their way through the assemblage of socio-cultural influences on their feelings (Brown, 2000; Brown, 2002; Clarke, 2003; Vogler, 2000). By the time I realised this might have useful explicative potential in relation to this study I had completed the collection of data and it was apparent that the

methods I had employed and my own analytic skills would not allow me to stake any robust claims to be able to detect or correctly interpret the presence of the unconscious in the interview data (Buckner, 2005; Chamberlayne, 2004a; 2004b; Froggett and Wengraf, 2004; Wengraf, 2004a; 2004b; 2006).

In conclusion then, I am arguing here that there is scope to elaborate the sociological account of emotion. I am not suggesting that it either biographical and/or psychoanalytic approaches should supersede it, but that rather that there might even be gains to be made on all sides by bringing these approaches into dialogue with each other. Of course, in making this proposal I cannot begin to unravel the substantial and serious ontological questions which bringing these approaches into dialogue – social constructionism, biographic research and psychoanalytically-inflected thinking – imply. However, at the very least, the arguments advanced in this thesis suggest some points of articulation at which this dialogue might be staged if the sociological study of love is to provide a fuller understanding of human emotional experience.

## *Love is ...?*

A research project on young people's view and experiences about love and romance

This sheet gives you information about the 'Love is ...?' research project to help you decide if you want to take part. If you don't want to take part, then you need to let Simon know either by telling him or via the Centre.

### **The 'Love is...?' project**

Simon Forrest is a research student at the Open University. As part of his course he is undertaking a study into young people's view and experiences of love and romance. He has spent a year reading about love and romance and is now going to talk to young people before writing about what he finds out.

### **What does it involve?**

Simon is going to be around the club watching how young people talk about and manage their romantic relationships with each other. He will also be doing some interviews.

### **How can I take part?**

You don't have to do anything to take part. Unless you let Simon know that you don't want him to note down something you're already involved!

### **When will it happen?**

We are planning to hold a session on [*insert date and time*] when Simon will talk about the research, explain what it involves and why he is doing it. There will also be an opportunity to have a general discussion about love and romance and ask him any questions.

### **Where will the research take place?**

All the research will take place in the Girvan Community Centre. As well as being able to talk in the club we can have access to a quiet and private room and can make tea, coffee and drinks.

### **Who is doing the research?**

Simon Forrest is a research student at the Open University studying for a PhD. Simon has worked as a teacher, youth worker and University researcher. He has been doing research with young people for more than ten years. Simon lives near Ayr.

**Please turn over...**



**Who will know what I say and how will it be used?**

It is an important part of research to treat things which people say as private. If Simon writes something down about you, or, if you take part in any interview he tapes records it, you can look at it at any time. But, Simon won't be showing things about you to other people or things about other people to you unless he has their permission.

The only time Simon will share any information is if he thinks that you are being hurt, harmed or abused by someone. Then he has talk to the local Social Services to try and get you support and help and to stop the abuse. Simon will never talk to someone else without telling the person involved first.

At the end of the project Simon will write about what he has found out. If he uses something which is about you or that you said your name and any other names that you use will be changed along with any other information that means you could be identified.

During the project Simon will keep all the notes and tape-recordings to do with project in a secure place which only he can access. All the tape recording and notes will be destroyed at the end of the project.

**Can I change my mind about taking part?**

You can change your mind about taking part in the project at any time. If you don't want Simon to write about you just tell him or get a youth worker to tell him. If you talk to Simon in an interview he will always ask you to sign a form which shows that you understand what will use the material for agreed and to it. And remember, you can always change your mind once have filled this form in and Simon will not use anything material about you. If you want something you said not be included you just have to say so!

**How do I consent and what does this mean?**

Everyone involved in the project has to be over 16 years old – which means that you can make your own decisions about whether to be involved in the research or not. If you want to talk to your family about it you can, and Simon is happy to talk to them (you can contact him at the address below).

Simon Forrest  
Garden House  
Auchendrane  
By Ayr  
KA7 4TW

01292 442249  
spf83@open.ac.uk

And if Simon can't help you, you can always contact his supervisors Professor Ann Phoenix or Dr Peter Redman at the Open University 01908 274066

Interview consent form

*Love is ...?*

A research project on young people's view and experiences about love and romance

By signing this sheet you are agreeing to give an interview that is taking place today [INSERT date].

You should have read the information leaflet which gave you details of what the research involves and how it will take place and what use the information that you give will be put to.

Please tick the boxes to show the following:

<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>

You have read and understood the information leaflet about the project

That you agreed to take part today on the basis of what this says

Remember,

- You can withdraw from the research now or at any point;
- You can have any information you provided withdrawn from the research now or at any time;
- Everything that you say will be treated in confidence unless you are being hurt, harmed or abused by someone;
- Any names or other information that you give which might identify you will be changed in any reporting;
- All materials, tape recordings and notes relating to what you say will be kept securely and destroyed at the end of the study ;
- You can ask to see the transcript of this interview at any time.

Signed

Print name

Date

**Appendix 2: Paralinguistic annotations used in this thesis**

(.)	Gap or pause ( each . indicating around half a second)
(( ))	Non-verbal activity e.g. laughter
()	Unclear or inaudible word(s)
<u>      </u>	Emphasis
CAPITALS	Markedly louder than surrounding speech
°°	Markedly quieter than surrounding speech
[]	Overlapping talk and extent of overlap
[[	Speakers start a turn simultaneously

Adapted from Silverman’s Simplified transcription symbols adapted in, Silverman, D. (1993) Interpreting Qualitative Data: methods for analysing talk, text and interaction, London: Sage



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